The L. Tom Perry Special Collections preserves unique primary and secondary sources and makes them available for research in original and digitized forms. As caretakers of cultural, anecdotal, and historical materials, representing over a dozen collection areas, the Special Collections curators and staff welcome guests to the reading room, reference library, exhibition areas, and lecture room. Please visit the website at http://crl.lib.byu.edu.

The Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History is a center for the scholarly study of Mormon history from the perspective of faith. Institute faculty edit collections of significant documents and write interpretative histories and biographies with an aim to publish, works that meet the highest professional standards and inform both academic and general audiences. The institute also fosters connections among a broad range of scholars interested in Mormon history by sponsoring grants, fellowships, lectures, and scholarly seminars. For more information, visit the institute’s website at http://jfieldingsmith.byu.edu.

Telling the Tale: Mormon Women’s History

Early Efforts captured women’s voices by preserving their personal writings. Newspapers and books memorialized and chronicled their experiences.

- Repositories: special collections at BYU and other universities, LDS Church Archives, Daughters of Utah Pioneers museums, and state and local historical societies.
- Publications: Women’s Exponent (1872–1914), Young Women’s Journal (1889–1938), and Relief Society Magazine (1914–1976), books by Daughters of Utah Pioneers (1939–present), and institutional histories.

Academic Approaches: magnified interest in 1990s by luminaries of the American West presaged a wave of scholarly research on Latter-day Saint women. In the 1990s historians at the LDS Church Historical Department with others advanced this work from the perspective of faith.

- Social activism: a new social history, and the women’s movement, coupled new interest in placing women’s history in the mainstream of academic inquiry.
- American and professional historians studied Mormon women’s political and economic contributions and produced early biographical works. Scholars drew upon primary sources to challenge stereotypes with more complex realities.

Expanded Scholarship: in the 1980s and 1990s, magnified interest in Mormon women among scholarly and popular audiences. New disciplinary frameworks like postmodernism raised new questions, and new technology prompted new formats.

- Scholarly work on gender generated cultural and sociological studies of Mormon women. Scholars explored the relationship of women to LDS theology and women’s institutional roles and responsibilities.
- Recovery of women’s texts created a genre of literary and historical women’s studies. A growing number of published diaries and reminiscences made primary texts accessible, allowed scholars to interpret history, and enabled readers to understand women’s experiences.

ACROSS two centuries and around the world, women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have preserved their experiences in a variety of forms. Their legacies are recorded in diaries, reminiscences and biographies, letters, poetry, publications, oral histories, photographs, art, and scraps of paper and fabric. The L. Tom Perry Special Collections of the Harold B. Lee Library and the Women’s History Initiative of the Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History have combined resources to feature these records. This exhibition creates a patchwork of the Mormon female world as contained in BYU’s Special Collections and as guided by Smith Institute research—connecting many threads of faith, thought, and experience.

“To Tell the Tale” highlights how women have preserved their experiences as sisters, mothers, Relief Society members, missionaries, artists, educators, politicians, and writers—at home, in the community, and abroad. The documents and artifacts provide insight into the faith, struggles, triumphs, and daily experiences of these women. The exhibition represents the vast resources available to better understand our past, our LDS community, and ourselves, and encourages all women to preserve their lives for future generations.

"Memory would fail to write a full account of my life’s history ... I marvel that I am alive today to tell the tale.”

— Nancy Naomi Alexander Tracy (1816–1902)

Our Mormon manuscript collections are rich with the life writings of ordinary women from our recent past. Brigham Young University’s Harold B. Lee Library, among other local repositories, has such gems packed away in fibered boxes, often untouched from year to year. Not the written-for-publication works of famous women, these are either the daily potings of mothers, wives, daughters, or the women’s mature attempts to set their lives in order, to explain themselves, not to the world, ... but to their children and their children’s children in the Puritan tradition of testimony bearing and lasting testament. In loose shears or bound notebooks, they are as imperfect as the lives they represent, as incomplete as a peek through the keyhole, as unfinished as mortality.”


The story of women’s voices in the Smith Institute.

21 January 2004 – 4 February 2004

BYU brigham young university

AN EXHIBITION SPONSORED BY

Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History

and

L. Tom Perry Special Collections

21 January – 4 June 2004

Harold B. Lee Library

brigham young university

“Preserving the Lives of Mormon Women”
**Preserving the Lives of Mormon Women**

“History has told us very little about women; judging from its pages, one would suppose their lives were insignificant and their opinions worthless... But although the historians of the past have been ungrateful of women, and it is the exception of she be mentioned at all, yet the future will deal more generously with womanhood, and the historians of the present age will find it very embarrassing to ignore women in the records of the nineteenth century.”

— Emmeline B. Wells, “Self-Made Women,” 1881

“Women have long been recognized as preservers, determined to find ways to hold on to the past and link it to the present and future. Maybe in their role as creators of life they feel more keenly the continuity of generations and seek to connect them through a shared memory, either through artifacts lovingly passed from generation to generation, or through oral and written means, whereby traditions and customs as well as thoughts and experiences are carefully transmitted.”

— Carol Cornwall Madsen, “Women’s Traces: The Words They Left Behind,” 1991

“Contemporary Mormon women have found in their history precedents, possibilities, and hope for the future. The study of women’s life experiences and women’s institutions apart from those of men, while preliminary to a truly integrated history, has affirmed the identity and importance of a female culture centered in women’s relationships with each other.”


“It is woman’s destiny to have a voice in the affairs of government. She was designed for it. She has a right to it. This great social upheaval, this woman’s movement that is making itself heard and felt, means something more than that certain women are ambitious to vote and hold office, I regard it as one of the great leaders by which the Almighty is lifting up this fallen world, lifting it nearer to the throne of its creator.”


“Anyone who spends a substantial amount of time going through the materials in church archives must gain a new appreciation of the important and indispensable role of women in the history of the LDS church—not to mention new insights into church history resulting from viewing it through the eyes of women.”


“Someday, when the whole story of this and previous dispensations is told, it will be filled with courageous stories of our women, of their wisdom and their devotion, their courage.”


“There are few lives so uneventful that a true record of them would not be of some worth.”

— Martha Cragun Cox (1842-1912)