# DIALOGUE

A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUG

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# *MARY FIELDING SMITH: HER OX GOES MARCHING ON*

LAVINA FIELDING ANDERSON

I SHOULD PREFACE THESE REMARKS by establishing two things. First, I am no blood relation to Mary Fielding Smith, although, like all of you, I proudly claim her for a spiritual sister; second, my subject is not Mary Fielding Smith herself but what she represents: the process by which women of church history are turned into heroic role models for women of contemporary times.

Why did I choose her? Before the age of eighteen, I would guess I knew the names of only three historic Mormon women: Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow and Mary Fielding Smith. In terms of biography, I knew nothing about Emma except that she was Joseph Smith's wife and the first president of the Relief Society. I knew that Eliza R. Snow had written "O My Father." But I knew a lot about Mary Fielding Smith: I knew she had an ox raised from the dead.

I knew that the captain of her company tried to persuade her not to come to Salt Lake because she would be a hindrance, and that she announced she would beat him to the Valley without asking any help from him—and made it. I knew that when her oxen were lost, the men hunted for them unsuccessfully, but she, after praying, went directly to the thicket where they were entangled, disregarding a herdsman who told her they were in the opposite direction. I also knew about the tithing clerk in Salt Lake Valley who tried to tell her that a poor widow like herself shouldn't pay tithing and whom she rebuked because she needed the blessings.

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At eighteen, those were the things I knew about Mary Fielding Smith. I'm not sure where I learned them. I went back to my old Sunday School manuals, and not one of those stories is there. Primary manuals? Seminary and Church history? MIA manuals? I couldn't find a trace. But whatever the source, I *knew* the stories. And for me determined faithfulness became a synonym for Mary Fielding Smith. In other words, Mary Fielding Smith was a role model, an ideal, a heroine. Technically these words don't mean the same thing, but I will use them somewhat interchangeably because I suspect that the differences depend more on the generations we belong to than on semantics.

And those three words have always been double valued—a fire to warm that can also burn, an anchor to stabilize that can also immobilize. When Janath Cannon was in the Relief Society General Presidency, she lamented the fact that so many sisters don't seem to understand that "ideals are stars to steer by, not sticks to beat ourselves with." There is a terrible—and sometimes fatal—ambiguity in ideals. They are powerful—and we need that power to make us reach beyond ourselves. But they can also overpower us and destroy what is unique in each individual by emphasizing only what we share in common with others.

Let me talk about three different aspects of this ambiguous power: First, the ways in which ideals (heroines or role models) can help us; second, the ways in which they can damage us; and third, some suggestions for ways to be warmed and enlightened by them without being burned and blinded.

The gospel itself is designed so that we learn it by role models, which is the first reason for our having them. Christ gave us an insight into the whole process when he issued that invitation, which is also a commandment, "Come, . . .follow me" (Matt. 19:21). And later he asked the Nephites, "What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily. . . , even as I am." (3 Nephi 27:27.) He presented himself as the perfect role model. To me this indicates that the search for role models is ultimately a righteous one and also a very natural one, possibly an inevitable one.

The second reason for our having role models is linked to the first. We learn principles from people. The great emphasis that the scriptures place on teaching can also be read as a great emphasis on teachers. In addition to the central image of Christ as the perfect teacher, we have the scriptural models of Abinadi teaching the wicked priests of King Noah, his words falling on the prepared heart and awakened mind of Alma. We see the pattern repeating itself a generation later when Alma's testimony of Jesus is the key that unlocks the chains of hell for his apostate son. It carries into a third generation as Alma the Younger teaches his own sons, Shiblon, Coriantumr, and Helaman, the same truths of the gospel, especially the centrality of Christ. We don't have an equally dramatic chain of mother-daughter teachings, although we know from the testimony of the apostle Paul that a woman named Lois had a powerful faith that blossomed also in her daughter Eunice, and bloomed again, equally strongly, in Eunice's son Timothy. A more modern example is found in an article some of you may have read in the June 1978 *Ensign*, "Our Five-Generation Love Affair with Relief Society" (pp. 37–39). It is by Athelia Tanner Woolley, whom I first met when we were on our missions in France.

In it she talks about how her children "play Relief Society" and how in that play is the seed of a sixth-generation love for Relief Society that Athelia learned from her own mother, Athelia Sears Tanner, who learned it from her mother, Athelia Call Sears, who learned it from her mother, Mary Thompson Call, who learned it from her mother, Pamela Barlow Thompson, who learned it from her mother, Elizabeth Haven Barlow, a member of the Nauvoo Relief Society—all of them ward Relief Society presidents at one time or another.

The third reason why role models are so important for us is also found in the scriptures. When Alma the Younger is transmitting the precious gold plates to his son Helaman, he explains why they must be cherished and preserved: "They have enlarged the memory of this people" (Alma 37:8). That is what role models do for us: They enlarge our memories, our imaginations, and our capacities. Through the stories of how others have met and overcome obstacles, we furnish our minds with alternatives for action and enlarge our own repertoires for response. By comparing what we might do with what our heroine did, we can walk through some decisions before we have to make them ourselves.

There's a fourth reason for role models—how we relate to others. In a fine Commissioner's Lecture Series address given at BYU in 1972, Leonard J. Arrington, then Church Historian, said, "Church history has much to do with the establishment of our identities." By providing us with heroes, it provides us "with desirable patterns of identity and behavior."

> Second. . .one of the great strengths of the Church is its ability to give us the sense that each of us is playing a part, however humble, in the great drama of religious history which we are certain will eventuate in triumph. Third, the Church provides a fellowship—a visible community. . .a spiritual home. ["Church History and the Achievement of Identity" (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1972), p. 6]

We need role models, not only because they teach us how to relate to ourselves and to the gospel, but because they teach us how to relate to the larger community of the Church.

Remember Mary Fielding Smith and her ox? Those four little stories teach us how our own resources can be magnified if we will call on the Lord in faith. They also teach us that the Lord is responsive to prayer and that the Church has room for everyone—an impoverished widow, a crabby captain and a nine-year-old boy who didn't know he was going to become President of the Church someday. Finally, they teach us that the Church demands commitment and work from us.

Now let us look at the other side of the ideal, the dark side of the star, as it were, and see some of the ways role models can be dangerous, even damaging.

The first problem I see is the natural and inevitable consequence of that great strength: that we learn principles from people. The Church is in the business of teaching principles and has always known the value of illustrating

its principles with the lives of exemplary people. The problems come when a person becomes *only* an illustration. Mary Fielding Smith is an example of faith. Heber J. Grant is an example of persistence. Deborah in the Old Testament is an example of courage. And so forth. You can see the danger of equating one person with one trait—it turns that person into a stereotype.

And I feel that Mary Fielding Smith *has* become a stereotype, an image larger than life. We don't see her developing faith. We just see her being completely faithful. If we don't feel our own faith growing, Mary may overwhelm us with her perfection. Furthermore, we may see her life as being controlled *by her faith*—and that is a big difference from seeing her life as being controlled *by her decision to be faithful.*

How did Mary become a stereotype? Davis Bitton, in a masterful article entitled "The Ritualization of Mormon History," points out that this process is "not invention." Instead it is "a selecting out of certain aspects, dramatizing them, memorializing them, and giving the whole the simplicity of a morality play." The end result is to transform "events and personalities. . .into something fixed, heightened, and to a greater or lesser degree, standardized." (*Utah Historical Quarterly*, 43 [Winter 1975]: 75, 79.)

Until Ronald G. Esplin of the Church Historical Department publishes his study of the marriage of Mary and Hyrum Smith, the standard biography of Mary Fielding is Don C. Corbett's *Mary Fielding Smith, Daughter of Britain* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1966). He notes that she died in 1852, four years after reaching the Valley, and that after the funeral there was no formal tribute for more than thirty years until Joseph F. Smith, her son, published a faith-promoting story about her. Then Corbett says things like this:

> Down through the years since her death, Mary Smith's name *has grown* and become significant in Mormon history—a saintly memory—associated with pioneer times. Her heroic stature has inspired the teacher, painter, and historian. This one pioneer, perhaps more than all others, seems to *epitomize* all the magnificent Mormon women who crossed the plains. . . .Hers is an *image* rooted in outstanding deeds and accomplishments. [Pp. 267–68; italics added.]

A little later, he uses that significant word again: "As her *image* has steadily *enlarged* in word, print, and picture, more and more have come to know about her." The very choice of words betrays that we are meeting, despite her very real virtues, not a real woman, but an enlarged image of one, more heroic in retrospect than she was in life.

In addition to being larger than life, this image of Mary is also more incomplete than life. Some traits get selected for emphasis and others are deemphasized. In both Corbett's biography and Joseph F. Smith's account, much is made of the unreasonable and petty persecution she suffered from the captain responsible for their safety as they crossed the plains. No doubt there was some real friction, and he may have been genuinely unreasonable. However, both Joseph F. Smith and Don Corbett are descendants of Mary Fielding Smith, and it is possible that their loyalty to Mary's image was an overriding consideration. That captain, Cornelius Peter Lott, may not have

been quite the villain he seems to be. One of his descendants pointed out to me that Cornelius managed Joseph Smith's farm outside Nauvoo and later managed Brigham Young's Forest Farm here in the Valley. Joseph Smith III, the son of Joseph Smith, remembers an incident in Nauvoo when his father had wrestled all comers and had thrown them all. Cornelius Lott was, at that time, seven years older than the Prophet; but, when challenged, he immediately responded in kind: "Well, my boy, if you'll take it catch-as-catch-can, you can't throw old man Lott!" Young Joseph recalls that the Prophet and Brother Lott closed with each other several times, "But the best Father could do was to get the old man down to his knees. . . .He gave up his efforts to throw the sturdy old fellow and much good-natured banter at his expense was indulged in as he gave up the struggle." (Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, ed., *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration,* condensed by Bertha Audentia Anderson Hulmes [Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1952], pp. 34–35.) An even more important personal connection was established when Cornelius's daughter, Melissa, was sealed to Joseph Smith by Hyrum Smith on 20 September 1843.

Brigham Young also trusted Cornelius. In Winter Quarters Brigham Young brought two women to Cornelius, and he married them for life, with Brigham officiating. The two women were then sealed for eternity to the Prophet Joseph. Clearly the marriage was to provide a means for the women to reach the Valley, because both of them later married other men in Salt Lake. (See Lott Family Bible, Historical Department Archives; Rhea Lott Vance, *Descendants of Cornelius Peter Lott,* 1798–1972 [n.p., n.d.], pp. 2–16; Winter Quarters sealing records in possession of Lynn Carson, Salt Lake City.) Obviously he was efficient, capable, reliable and trustworthy.

Most of the negative stories about the petty harassment and tyranny Lott inflicted on Mary come from Joseph F. Smith's recollections written years after he had crossed the plains as a nine-year-old. Both Cornelius and Mary were dead by then. Joseph F. revealingly says that at one point on the journey he "resolved on revenge for . . . the many . . . insults and abuses [Lott] had heaped upon my mother, and perhaps could have carried out my resolutions had not death come timely to my relief and taken him away, while I was yet a child" (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1969], p. 151). Although Joseph F. Smith was not known as vindictive, once he was grown, he certainly seems to express vindictive feelings on this occasion, and his image of the villainous captain is the one that has prevailed, just as his heroic view of his mother has prevailed.

I had the image of Mary as being virtually alone except for her little son, Joseph F., and braving the sneers of the vile captain as she struggled westward. In actual fact, she arrived in Winter Quarters with a household of eighteen people, including her sister Mercy Fielding Thompson; her brother Joseph Fielding; their families; the five children of Hyrum by his previous marriage, including a sixteen-year-old boy; her own son and daughter; three hired men; an unmarried woman who had been living in the Smith household and helping with the homemaking duties since at least 1837; and an older man who was a general handyman. Possibly even more important, she had

been sealed to Heber C. Kimball in January 1846 for time only (she was sealed to Hyrum for eternity) and thus was part of the Kimball family. At one point, Heber sent back two teams of oxen to help her get her outfit up to strength as she left Winter Quarters.

About half of these people went on with others before Mary herself left Winter Quarters in June 1848. Knowing that Mary wasn't alone—that she had her brother; Hyrum's oldest son, who was in his midteens; her own nine-year-old son, Joseph F.; two stepdaughters; her own daughter; and three adult women—means that she had, at the very least, a group on whom she could count for moral support, even though the logistics of keeping track of five wagons and teams and loose stock would have complicated the problem. (Incidentally, even though the incident of losing the oxen and being inspired to find them in the thicket usually gets transferred to the trip across the plains, it actually happened during a trip back to Winter Quarters from St. Joseph to purchase needed supplies. There must be a Law of Multiplying Drama that allows for condensing as much as possible into as short a time span as permissible.)

But possibly the most dangerous aspect of the problem occurs in our own minds when we take a simplified, stereotyped image and try to squeeze our own complex and rather recalcitrant lives into those limited dimensions. It is artistry that creates these simple heroines of faith out of living people—and art renders an incomplete imitation of life. When we, in turn, try to imitate that art in our own lives, frustrations can easily multiply, making us feel incompetent, unworthy and overwhelmed.

But what is the answer? Are we to ignore role models altogether, to eschew ideals, and resolutely carve out a wholly individualistic path? Of course not. In the first place, to do so is impossible. Even if we wanted to, we couldn't help seeing desirable aspects of other people's lives and imitating them. Furthermore, let me mention again the underlying, eternal reason that gives role models their power: We learn principles from people. Our ultimate teacher and our ultimate role model is the Savior himself. It is an act of the utmost pride and folly to think that we can achieve salvation without following that model.

However, let me suggest a few things that we *can* do to benefit from the light and warmth of starry ideals without getting so starry-eyed that we stumble into a ditch.

First, we can recognize that institutions can create role models and offer them to us as guides but that we need to select role models appropriate for our own circumstances. As Leonard Arrington mentioned in "Persons For All Seasons: Women in Mormon History," (BYU Studies, Fall 1979, pp. 39–58), the Church has emphasized different aspects of women's roles in different ways as the Church's needs have changed. He saw the Church originally honoring "mothers"—women like Lucy Mack Smith and Elizabeth Ann Whitney who self-sacrificingly nourished the Church, their families and the poor during the difficult years when the Church was being established. In early Utah, the emphasis was on kingdom-building, and he saw the Church emphasizing a "sister" role for women, encouraging them to work alongside

the brethren in building communities, supporting missionaries, and becoming self-sustaining. Still later, when the battle against the desert had been largely won, there was time for women to explore individual talents, and in the "daughter" role encouraged by the Church they founded newspapers, sought educations and developed creative talents.

It is obvious that now the Church sees a real need to encourage women to focus on strong marriages and families. You can see this example in the Relief Society manual for 1979–80. I looked at the illustrative examples used in the year's lessons and found, excluding the cultural-refinement lessons, seventeen examples of men, nine of women in general, one working woman, three converts, eight older women, thirteen identified by Church calling, fifteen single women, and *fifty-two* mothers. The sheer repetition communicates the importance of a mother's role. But what if you are not married? Or married but childless? Or what if your children have left home? In some ways, the role model of a mother is then less relevant to your circumstances. Should you feel excluded, peripheral or rejected? Certainly not. The most important thing we can do to keep ideals from getting out of hand is to select the ones that are applicable to us rather than worrying because we don't seem to fit into the one that the Church might seem to feel is most important right now.

The second thing we can do is to be fair—to refuse the trap of thinking that a selective, simplified stereotype of a woman is the whole woman. It would be easy for us to think that Mary Fielding Smith, with her great faith, never had any problems that she couldn't work out simply and effectively with the Lord's help. If she was perfect in faith, she must have been perfect in every other aspect of her life as well, particularly with her children and her marriage. After all, she married the Church Patriarch, and her son became president of the Church. How successful can you be?

Well, there were some rough places in working out that family. I was very moved by reading some of the letters (currently being edited for publication by Ronald G. Esplin of the Joseph F. Smith Institute for Church History at BYU) that she and Hyrum exchanged during the early years of their marriage. Mary was thirty-six years old when she married Hyrum, and his first wife, Jerusha, had been dead less than three months, leaving five children, ranging in age from ten to newborn. According to family records, the Prophet Joseph received on behalf of Hyrum a revelation urging him to remarry quickly and designating Mary as that woman. (See Corbett, pp. 43–44.) During the next seven years, they left Kirtland, moved to Missouri, were driven out of Missouri, and re-established themselves in Nauvoo. Hyrum was absent a great deal of the time, leaving Mary to cope on her own. One of her Nauvoo letters, giving the family news, ends on a genuinely sad note. She signs it, "your faithful Companion and Friend but unhappy StepMother M. Smith." Then in a long postscript, she reports stories that have come back to her that even Hyrum felt she was "an Oppressive StepMother to your Children." (Mary Fielding Smith to Hyrum Smith, 14 Sept. 1842, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.) She expresses her hurt and discouragement that her best efforts had

been so unappreciated. With so many Latter-day Saint women today facing the challenges of second marriages and blended families, it somehow gives Mary a dimension she lacked until we learn that she felt insecure about how she was doing, that she needed Hyrum's support and reassurance, and that she felt downcast when the challenges seemed insurmountable. And his letters from Liberty Jail express a trust and tenderness that show real affection.

Obviously, then, we should be willing to work to know these women as whole people, rather than as stereotypes. Because of the Church's teaching goals, the institutions in the Church give us selective information. This is their job. But it means that we will be given stereotypes. Our responsibility is to go beyond the stereotype and to sometimes go beyond the material available in lesson manuals or selective biographies. For example, the social relations lessons in the 1967–77 Relief Society manual are on leadership. They introduce us to twelve historic women who illustrate different aspects of leadership. But only one of them, Martha Spence Heywood, is presented in any kind of detail—more than two or three hundred words—so that we have some sense of her as a whole woman.

Another example is Emma Smith. The Church has never come to terms with Emma. Instead we've ended up with two stereotypes in absolute conflict. One stereotype is the angel Emma, the elect lady, beloved wife of Joseph, recipient of the only revelation addressed to a woman in the Doctrine and Covenants, first president of the Relief Society. How can we think ill of a woman who was not only the wife of a prophet but *the* wife of *the* Prophet? Yet we also have the stereotype of the evil Emma, the Emma who opposed polygamy and didn't come west, the Emma whose son became president of another church, the Emma who must not have had a testimony of the gospel. The only article completely devoted to Emma ever printed in an official Church periodical in one hundred fifty years ends with the death of Joseph Smith (Valeen Tippets Avery and Linda King Newell, "The Elect Lady, Emma Hale Smith," *Ensign*, September 1979, pp. 64–67. Their biography of her definitely will deal with her entire life.). I feel that until we accept Emma as a full woman, as both our sister in the faith and in some ways as our spiritual mother in the faith, we will be cut off from understanding part of what it means to be a woman in the Church today.

These ambiguities are eloquently expressed in part of an unpublished poem by Dianne Dibb Forbis of Rexburg, Idaho:

I was afraid to know you
Emma.

Wishing, wanting you as queen,
I dared not let my touch explore full texture
of your after-Carthage
velvet choice that seemed so wrong.
Weren't royal robes then textured crudely?
Weren't they whipping in wild winds
on the barren and bleak plains?

My allegiance went with wagons
Westward
while your tragic tears
blurred your steady gaze on truth,
kept you clutching souvenirs.

Admiring you seemed heresy,
Rejecting you would be too cruel.

One of the most interesting aspects of this study about Mary is something that I *didn't* find out. I have asked a half-dozen people about the incident of blessing the ox. Almost without exception, they had the idea in their mind that Mary had done it herself. So did I. That ox gets resurrected an amazing number of times in Church literature—at least a dozen times, by my hasty count. And in every version that mentions Mary's ox, Mary called on her brother and another elder to anoint the ox.

So why is there this residual folk memory that Mary did it herself? It indicates to me that we have a fatal fondness for the dramatic and a woeful weakness for the stereotype, a weakness that we must be on guard against at all times. We want Mary to anoint her own ox because it makes a more powerful story—Mary alone with her faith against the wicked Cornelius Peter Lott and the dead ox.

But this subconscious rearrangement of the facts into folklore also indicates to me the protean forms that this story can take without losing its power. It was not at all uncommon for pioneers to anoint sick and dying animals. I have not made a systematic search to find out when the first recorded instance of an individual using the priesthood to bless an animal occurred, but I suspect it was after leaving Nauvoo during the traumatic trek across muddy Iowa when unsophisticated eastern horses were getting bitten by rattlesnakes and eating unfamiliar plants that turned out to be poisonous. Several journals from that period record discussions about whether blessing an animal was a proper use of priesthood authority. (They decided that it was.) I mentioned one example from Newel K. Whitney's journal in an article in the January 1980 *Ensign*, "Memories of the Way West," p. 22. Until I had done that research, Mary's ox was the only one I had ever heard of that had been administered to.

But Mary's ox was enough. When Old Buck got up and strode on towards the Valley, he walked into history. The hunger in us to believe that faith and priesthood ordinances can raise up a dead animal—or provide food for the starving, or comfort for the bereaved, or as Gene England has testified, keep a balky Chevrolet limping along so that he could perform his duties as branch president in Minnesota (see "Blessing the Chevrolet," *Dialogue*, IX (1974): 57–60)—that hunger is nourished by stories like this. Mary has taught us an element of faith that we might not otherwise know.

And the shadow of that ox stretches into our own day. When a friend in New York heard that I was doing this paper, she wrote back:

> Our dachshund developed bladder stones several years ago (about three to be exact) and I took him to the vet who wanted $600 for surgery

which might only give temporary relief until the stones formed again. I asked him the cause, etc. (increased alkalinity), and went home to think about where in the world I was going to come up with $600. Melissa (then twelve) said, "Get the elders to give him a blessing." I thought, "Why not?" So I called and of course nobody wanted to stick *his* neck out and do it so I called an old Utah farmer who was also the head of the high priests quorum. Yes, he'd heard about Mary Fielding Smith, but that was a long time ago, and he figured it was some misuse of priesthood power. *But,* he said,. . .nothing would be lost if *I* and *the girls* were to have a little prayer circle because there was no place I was going to get $600. . . .So we (Jill, Melissa, and I) got down on the floor and held Max (the dog) and we just went around the circle saying a prayer. I was in the middle of my part when it dawned on me that I *might* be able to change the hyperalkaline bladder back to normal by feeding the dog some kind of acid. It came to me that I should feed him 500 mg. of vitamin C (ascorbic acid) every day. So I bought chewables and did just that. Three years later the dog is going strong sans bladder stones. . . .He's still on vitamin C also.

Oxen can trample and gore—but they can also pull our wagons to promised valleys we could not otherwise reach. Mary Fielding Smith's ox marches on. And as we follow it, there may be moments when we feel a little breathless. But may we enjoy the trip.

*RETELLINGS OF THE OX STORY*

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"Contribution of Women in the Teaching of the Restored Gospel," *Instructor,* May 1930, p. 281. (This article attributes the blessing of animals to Mary: "This woman gave us the divine thought that God's power can be made manifest upon the dumb brute as well as upon human beings, a new revelation in faith.")

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Gates, Susa Young, "Mothers in Israel: Mary Fielding Smith, Wife of the Patriarch Hyrum Smith," *Relief Society Magazine,* 3 (March 1916): 123–35.

Hartshorn, Leon R., comp., "Mary Fielding Smith," in *Remarkable Stories from the Lives of Latter-day Saint Women,*" (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book, 1973), pp. 190–205.

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Lund, A. William, "Our Cover Picture," *Instructor,* September 1948, pp. 404–05, 437.

[Smith, Joseph F.] "A Noble Woman's Experience," in *Heroines of 'Mormondom,* second book of the Noble Women's Lives Series (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884), pp. 31–33.

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Smith, Joseph Fielding. *Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969, p. 150.

Tullidge, Edward W. *The Women of Mormondom* (1877; lithographic reprint, Salt Lake City, no publisher, 1957), pp. 347–48.

Webb, Kay, "Not Alone," *Instructor* (July 1960), p. 215. (No mention of raising the ox is made, but in a commission for a painting, the bishop making the commission specifies, "Can you idealize these oxen; can you give them the touch of heroism that Sister Smith gave them by her association?")