

# “Nine Children Were Born”: A Historical Problem from the Sugar Creek Episode

Carol Lynn Pearson

A most disturbing detail of the exodus from Nauvoo in late winter 1846 is that many pregnant women apparently were among the first Saints to depart. The exodus of the Saints and the drama and difficulty experienced by them at such encampments as Sugar Creek have been painted in our history books with the darkest of tones. “Sugar Creek,” writes Wallace Stegner, “is notorious in the histories as a place of intense hardship, as if it had held a huddle of refugees without rags to cover them or a bone to gnaw.”<sup>1</sup>

And of all the vivid description that has come down to us from the experience at Sugar Creek, none is more vivid than the description of that first night there in which nine babies were born. This piece of information comes to us from no less reliable a source than Eliza R. Snow. She has been quoted in almost all the history books, probably the earliest being Tullidge’s *The Women of Mormondom*, printed in 1877.

Eliza writes of Sugar Creek, “I was informed that on the first night of the encampment nine children were born into the world, and from that time, as we journeyed onward, mothers gave birth to offspring under almost every variety of circumstances imaginable, except those to which they had been accustomed; some in tents, others in wagons—in rain-storms and in snow-storms.”<sup>2</sup>

The image of suffering that the birth of nine babies in winter creates is strong. In our minds we see women large with child, heaving their way across a frozen Mississippi River on foot, already burned out of their homes, traumatized into giving birth by the viciousness of the mobs that stand shrieking on the other side of the river.

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Carol Lynn Pearson is well known to Mormon audiences for her poetry, drama, and essays.

<sup>1</sup>Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion* (New York City: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup>Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York City: n.p., 1877), p. 307.

But other evidence seems to paint a different picture. Sugar Creek actually was a well-ordered camp with adequate provisions. The Mormons had been preparing for this move for months. There was no element of surprise or immediate trauma in it. Not everyone had to leave at once; in fact, many remained in Nauvoo for months afterwards.<sup>3</sup> Stegner writes that “most of the women wouldn’t have had to bear their children in the snow if they had not chosen to.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus there is a problem: the pregnant Mormon women seem to have *chosen* to rush out that first night to have their babies in the snow. Yet these women hardly seem the type to have made such a choice. Eliza notes, “Let it be remembered that the mothers of these wilderness-born babes were not savages, accustomed to roam the forest and brave the storm and tempest—those who had never known the comforts and delicacies of civilization and refinement. They were not those who, in the wilds of nature, nursed their offspring amid reeds and rushes, or in the recesses of rocky caverns; most of them were born and educated in the Eastern States . . . had gathered with the Saints . . . had lovely homes, decorated with flowers and enriched with choice fruit trees, just beginning to yield plentifully.”<sup>5</sup>

So they were not the type to purposely choose a hostile environment in which to give birth. The astute reader of Mormon history may at this point wonder if maybe the women got themselves into more suffering than they needed to because they knew suffering was a sign of being God’s chosen people. After all, Orson Pratt wrote in his diary that he felt to “rejoice that we have the privilege of passing through tribulation for the truth’s sake.”<sup>6</sup>

But that theory does not explain why intelligent women would choose to put their lives and their babies’ lives in jeopardy. There is a better answer: they didn’t choose to. It is certain they suffered, and it is equally certain the babies came under the worst of circumstances. Nine babies, in fact, *were* born in one night. But it was not at Sugar Creek.

I stumbled onto the answer to the puzzle quite by accident while researching in diaries in the Special Collections room at the Brigham Young University library. At the beginning of one diary, that of Joseph Smith Black, was a statement by his mother, Jane Johnston,

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<sup>3</sup>B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 3:1–2.

<sup>4</sup>Stegner, *Gathering of Zion*, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup>Tullidge, *Women of Mormondom*, p. 308.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 303.

dictated to Joshua Bennett on 12 May 1883, giving a brief history of her life. Here are the pertinent paragraphs:

I came to Nauvoo under council [*sic*] of the authorities and left my husband on a two year mission. Moved from Nauvoo to Augusta and remained there until my husband came to us in the year 1843. We then moved to Nauvoo again and remained there until the Saints were driven from Nauvoo across the Mississippi River.

My husband being in Canada at the time, we then went to Montrose. Before we crossed the river a party of the mob rode up and surrounded our wagon and made a demand that I should give up what arms we had. I then had a pistol in my bosom, which I drew out and told them it was there, and that I would use it before I gave it up. They did not take it from me, but threatened to throw me in the river that night. We then ferried across the river into Iowa and remained in Montrose a short time.

I then buried what arms I had in a quilt in a hole under the wagon wheel. Had nothing to eat only half a bushel of meal and half a dozen cucumbers that were given to me by Martin Littlewood. There were a great many sick among the Saints and nothing to comfort them, and nourish them, but corn meal, until the Lord sent quails amongst us, which supplied our wants.

I then got a tent from Brother Johnston and had women that were being delivered of child put in it. I was the mid-wife, and delivered nine babies that night. We had nothing to sweeten anything until the Lord sent honey dew, which we gathered from the bushes until we got all the sweets we wanted. I also boiled maple juice and got cakes of maple sugar.<sup>7</sup>

Suddenly new light is thrown on the subject of the nine babies. And the story now makes much better sense. Sister Johnston does not call the group she was with the “Poor Camp of September”; that’s what later historians call it. But that’s clearly what it was. By September only about one thousand of the poorest, sickest, feeblest (and probably the furthest along in pregnancy) of the Mormons remained in Nauvoo, along with a sizable number of gentiles who had bought up the property. Mob violence grew more and more brutal. The weak and ill-equipped Mormons staged a very short-lived and pitiful resistance against up to 2,500 militiamen. After a few days, they surrendered and agreed to leave Nauvoo at once. They quickly tied a few possessions into bundles and crossed the river, the last of them arriving by the evening of 17 September 1846.

The elements of Sister Johnston’s account fit this event—the river crossing to Montrose, the presence of the mobs, the almost total

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<sup>7</sup>Diary of Joseph Smith Black, typescript of manuscript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, p. 5.

lack of food, the presence of many sick, the availability of cucumbers (September, yes; February, no), and the remarkable appearance of quail.

It certainly seems logical that a woman who had conceived a child in December might hope she could remain in Nauvoo in some measure of comfort until after the birth. And it also seems possible, under the traumatic conditions of the final forced exodus, that nine births might come in one night.

So we will have to revise our picture of the suffering which went on at Sugar Creek, that "huddle of refugees without rags to cover them or a bone to gnaw." Stegner almost puts the puzzle together when he writes, "Some of that over-dramatization stems from the error of confusing Sugar Creek with the Poor Camp of September; some stems from Eliza Snow's report that nine babies were born in the ice-bound tent town the night before she arrived."<sup>8</sup> What Stegner did not seem to know is that Eliza's account *itself* comes from the confusion of the two separate waves of exodus.

Yet one wonders how the confusion began. Perhaps it was like the parlor game we call "gossip," in which a message is whispered around in a circle until it gets back to its original source. In this case the message was, "Nine babies were born—pass it on." After a few tellings, the Poor Camp became the Sugar Creek Camp, and the story has come down to us in that altered form. Furthermore, Eliza begins her account with "I was informed that," while Sister Johnston writes, "I was the midwife"; it is thus clear which account is derivative. In fact, Sister Johnston's statement is even notarized.

Thus, while many incidents serve as tribute to the suffering and the courage of the early Mormon women, it is significant that the mothers of those nine babies did not rush out at the first opportunity to give birth in the wilderness, but actually did so because there was no other choice. The true tale is a tribute to these women's good sense.

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<sup>8</sup>Stegner, *Gathering of Zion*, p. 50.