

**NAUVOO REMEMBERED:
HELEN MAR WHITNEY REMINISCENCES
(PART ONE)**

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The Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reported on 15 November 1896:

Sister Helen Mar Whitney died at 2 P.M. today at her residence in Salt Lake City. She was born in Mendon, Monroe County, N.Y., Aug. 22, 1828. Her parents were among the first to receive the Gospel in the State of New York, being baptized in April, 1832, removing to Kirtland in the fall of 1833. She was baptized when a child, and passed through the terrible persecutions in Missouri, removing with the Saints to Commerce. She was associated with Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and the leaders of the Church; was married to Horace K. Whitney, eldest son of Bishop Newell K. Whitney, in the Nauvoo Temple, Feb. 3, 1846. Her husband was called to go with the Pioneers in 1847. She came to Utah the following year, leaving Winter Quarters May 24th and arriving in October, 1848. Sister Whitney was the mother of 11 children, her eldest son being Bishop Orson F. Whitney.¹

The death notice continued:

She was a prominent woman in the Relief Society, was prophetic and patriotic in spirit, wrote many articles for publication on the Church and its doctrines, and was the author of two works on the subject of plural marriage. Under all circumstances she was true, devoted and faith-

ful, and a strong advocate of the principles of the Gospel, in which she trained her children, and of which she bore a constant testimony. She was surrounded by a number of members of her family at the time of her decease, and at her last moments appeared to recognize a number of persons who were not visible to those around her in the flesh. Her husband proceeded [sic] her into the spirit world, having departed this life Nov. 22, 1884.²

Helen Mar Whitney's obituary is a brief one for a woman who lived in an extraordinary time. Fortunately for us, Helen Mar took pen and paper in hand before she died to vividly describe her times in a series of articles published in the *Woman's Exponent*. One of the most impressive achievements of Utah women in the late nineteenth century was the publication of the *Woman's Exponent*.³ Although it was not an official publication of the LDS Church, it served as the major voice of Mormon women between 1872 and 1914. Among the many types of items published in the paper, personal reminiscences of those who witnessed and participated in the story of Nauvoo played a significant role.

Helen Mar Whitney not only recounts the experiences of her immediate family in this incredible series, including her father and mother (Heber C. and Vilate Kimball), but she also paints a panoramic picture of life among the early Saints in Kirtland, Far West, Nauvoo, and Winter Quarters.

Autobiographical works were rare in antiquity before the Roman and Christian eras, beginning about

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A.D. 100.⁴ Not until Roman times do we have an example of a woman's autobiographical work. Until the mid-seventeenth century, only about ten percent of the total number of published autobiographies were written by women. The nineteenth century ushered in a plethora of autobiographies--the result of the revolution in printing, increased economic stability, and, especially for women, advancements in education. The public was eager to read about everyone--not just the famous.

During the late nineteenth century, women's works included the usual diaries, letters, journals, captivity narratives, and spiritual autobiographies. Although most of the religious autobiographies published in the United States during this period were written by Quakers and published after their deaths, Mormon women wrote about their life stories and, in many cases, published them while still alive. Helen Mar Whitney is one of those women.

She wrote articles (including a Church history series) and poems in the *Woman's Exponent* during the years 1880 to 1891. During the LDS Church's jubilee celebration, Helen Mar began her important series on Church history.⁵ "This has been proclaimed as a year of jubilee," she wrote in the 15 May 1880 issue. She continued, "I truly rejoice that I have had the privilege of being numbered with those who have come up through much tribulation and gained a knowledge for myself that this is the work of God."⁶

In the first two articles, she recounted the difficult days of the Missouri persecution and then confessed in her third article, "When I first commenced these reminiscences, I only gave a short sketch and did not think to continue them, but having been urged to write more, I will."⁷ She also had another motive in publishing her life story:

I can truly say that I feel an interest in the welfare of all, and if some of the incidents of my life could impress the minds of others, as they have my own, I would feel amply repaid for writing them. There seems to be a great curiosity in the minds of strangers about the "Mormon women, and I am willing, nay, anxious, that they should know the true history of the faithful women of Mormondom."⁸

Helen Mar Whitney's story of Nauvoo is engaging, utilizing not only her own memory of the events she

personally experienced but also the diary and letters of her father and mother. Obviously, she wanted to preserve a "true history" of the Latter-day Saints, especially of the courageous women who settled on the banks of the Mississippi River from 1839-1846.

Like other Mormon women who wrote their personal life stories during the latter half of the nineteenth century, Helen Mar Whitney describes in vivid details those singular events of a woman's life: courtship, marriage, birth of a child, and the death of a family member or a friend. Yet her story radiates with a deep sense of faith in her religion. Like other spiritual autobiographies, this series of articles demonstrates the patient work of compiling, organizing, and narrating the life story of an ordinary woman who lived in an extraordinary time.⁹ The *Woman's Exponent* series reveals the larger picture of LDS Church history (based on years of thought and reflections) and, in particular, the intimate family experience of a young woman who lived in Nauvoo.

In the 1 July 1880 issue of the *Woman's Exponent*, Helen Mar reviews the story of the Latter-day Saints following their expulsion from Missouri in 1838-39. After his escape from incarceration in Missouri (16 April 1839), Joseph Smith immediately made plans to locate the Church headquarters in Hancock County, Illinois. Soon, Commerce, a small village on a promontory of land that jutted out from the eastern bank of the Mississippi River, was transformed into the Mormon Nauvoo--a gathering place for the refugees fleeing from the Extermination Order. For those escaping the difficulties of Missouri, Nauvoo was a city of hope, a place to regroup and start again. However, the swampy land on the river's edge--the flats as they were called--gave rise to a plague of disease and death that struck nearly every family who arrived in this refuge from the Missouri persecution.

The "chills," sometimes called the "ague," was in all probability malaria carried by the anopheles mosquito, which thrived in the area. Already physically weakened by the forced exodus from Missouri during the previous winter and spring, the Saints were highly at risk. Those in good health fell ill, and the condition of those in bad health worsened. Many died during the first two years in Nauvoo. The disease was more relentless and deadly than even the mobs they faced in Missouri. Helen Mar talks about the period as follows:

In the month of July [1839], Father moved us up to Commerce; he pulled down an old log stable belonging to Bro. Bozier, about one mile from the river, and laid up the logs at the end of the Bozier house, which had a number of rooms and contained several families; he put on a few "shakes" to cover it, but it had no floor or chinking; when it rained the water stood near ankle deep on the ground; the chimney of the other house, being built on the outside, served us as a fireplace. My mother, not liking the dirt floor, had a few little boards laid down to serve as a substitute. I remember the evening of the 23rd of August, 1839, we were visited by a heavy rain storm, and those boards floated on the water. My mother had bread light and ready to bake in a tin oven or reflector, and it had to be propped up so as to bake the bread before the fire, which was built upon andirons. Under these peculiar circumstances I was allowed to go and stop with one of our neighbors, and when I returned in the morning I was informed that a little stranger had arrived that night. This was truly a wonderful event and created quite a sensation in our midst. He was named after David Patten, and although born in a stable, he was a prince in our estimation. This was their sixth child, four of whom were then living. Father purchased five acres of woodland from Hyrum Kimball, and Brother Parley P. Pratt purchased the same number of acres adjoining. They went to work and cut logs and invited a few of the old citizens; viz.: Brother Bozier, Squire Wells, Louis Robinson and others, to assist in putting up their houses, as our people were mostly prostrated by sickness. Brother Pratt soon sold out his improvements and went with his family on a mission to England. Father was building his chimney and had just got to the ridge of the house when he was taken down with chills and fever. The hardships and exposures consequent on being driven from Missouri in the winter, had made the Saints easy subjects for the ague to prey upon in that swampy country; nearly all were taken down, one after another, and the ones who were not shaking or delirious with fever, would do their best towards waiting upon those that were. Many had to see their dear ones die and not one of the family able to follow them to their last resting place; hundreds were lying sick in tents and

wagons. The Prophet visited and administered words of consolation and often made tea and waited upon them himself and sent members of his own family who were able to go, to nurse and comfort the sick and sorrowful. He was often heard to say that the Saints who died in consequence of the persecutions, were as much martyrs as the ones who were killed in defence of the Saints or murdered at Haun's Mill. There were many living martyrs who remember those days and some will yet wear a martyr's crown. The powers of darkness seemed to have combined to put a stop to the work of the Almighty, but Satan's plans have always been frustrated, and they always will be.

One night while we were living in the Bozier House, we were awakened by our mother, who was struggling as though nearly choked to death. Father asked her what was the matter, when she could speak, she replied, that she dreamt that a personage came and seized her by the throat and was choking her. He lit a candle and saw that her eyes were sunken and her nose pinched in, as though she were in the last stage of cholera. He laid his hands upon her head and rebuked the spirit in the name of Jesus, and by the power of the holy Priesthood commanded it to depart. In a moment afterwards, some half a dozen children in other parts of the house were heard crying, as if in great distress; the cattle began to bellow and low, the horses to neigh and whinnow, the dogs barked, hogs squealed, and the fowls and everything around were in great commotion, and in a few minutes my father was called to lay hands on Sister Bentley, the widow of David Patten, who lived in the next room. She was seized in a similar manner to my mother. They continued quite feeble for several days from the shock.

One day after this circumstance had taken place, my father was visiting the Prophet. In his diary he says: "He took me a walk by the river side and requested me to relate the occurrence at the Bozier house. I did so, and also told him the vision of evil spirits in England on the opening of the Gospel to that people. After I had done this, I asked what all these things meant and whether or not there was anything wrong in me. "No, Brother Heber; at that time when you

were in England, you was then nigh unto the Lord. There was only a veil between you and Him, but you could not see Him.' When I heard it, it gave me great joy, for I then knew that the work of God had taken root in the land; it was this that caused the Devil to make a struggle to kill you." Joseph then said, "The nearer a person approaches the Lord, a greater power would be manifest by the Devil to prevent the accomplishment of the purposes of God. He then gave me a relation of many contests that he had had with Satan, and his power had been made manifest from time to time since the commencement of bringing forth the Book of Mormon."

In another place he says: "I crossed the river to Commerce with several of the Twelve, and as I was standing by the railing of the boat, looking at the beautiful site of Nauvoo, and I remarked, 'It is a very pretty place, but not a long abiding place for the Saints.' These remarks reached Elder Rigdon and family, and caused them to feel somewhat sad, as they were well situated in a nice stone house built by Dr. Isaac Galland, and otherwise comfortably situated. When we met in council in Joseph's house, the case of * * * was brought up for investigation and disposed of in a summary manner. Elder Rigdon then arose and said he had some feelings toward Elder Kimball, saying, I should suppose that Elder Kimball had passed through suffering and privations, mobbings and drivings enough to learn to prophesy good of Israel. I began to expect I was going to receive quite a chastisement from Elder Rigdon, knowing his peculiar temperament, I arose upon my feet and said, 'President Rigdon, I'll prophesy good concerning you, all the time, if you can get it?' On hearing that, Joseph had a hearty laugh with the brethren, when Elder Rigdon yielded the point."¹⁰

This first, but important, recollection of the Kimball family's experience in their new home does not add to our view of these difficult days--it is well known and documented.¹¹ But Helen Mar Kimball's account adds texture to that story. Helen Mar alludes to her father's first missionary efforts in Great Britain (1837-38). This reference was only a prelude to another apostolic mission to England with several members of the Twelve joining Heber C. Kimball in 1839. Her next published essay tells the heart-wrenching story of the

departure of these missionaries in late 1839 from Nauvoo. Some of them were seriously ill; nevertheless, they departed to begin the mission--leaving family members both ill and destitute and in some cases, in temporary quarters.

On the 14th day of September, 1839, President Brigham Young left his family at Montrose [Lee County, Iowa, across the river from Nauvoo], and was brought by Brother Israel Barlow to my father's house, where he remained sick until he started with father on their mission to England. He left his wife with a babe only ten days old, and all his children were sick and unable to wait upon each other. On the seventeenth Sister Young got a boy to carry her up from the river in his wagon to our house that she might nurse and comfort her husband to the hour of starting. My mother's babe was three weeks old, and she was sick with chills and fever. The day before they started my father had two very heavy shakes of the ague, and was very sick through the night. On the morning of the eighteenth Brother Charles Hubbard sent his wagon and span of horses with driver, and their trunks were put into the wagon by some brethren who had come to bid them good bye. Previous to starting, while they were taking breakfast, father got Brother Hubbard and another brother to cut down an old hollow tree, which hung over the house, it had worried him so that he could not bear to leave till he saw it felled to the ground; when he heard it fall he said, at the time rising from the table, "Now I am ready to go." The parting scene is best told by himself. He says: "I went to the bed and shook hands with my wife, who was shaking with the ague, having two children lying sick by her side; I embraced her and my children, and bid them farewell; the only child well was little Heber Parley, and it was with difficulty he could carry a two-quart pail full of water from a spring at the bottom of a small hill to assist in quenching their thirst. It was with difficulty we got into the wagon and started down the hill about ten rods; it appeared to me as though my very inmost parts would melt within me; leaving my family in such a condition, as it were, almost in the arms of death; it seemed to me as though I could not endure it. I said to the teamster, 'Hold up.' Said I to Brother Brigham, 'This is pretty tough,

ain't it? Let's rise up and give them a cheer.' We arose and swinging our hats three times over our heads, we cried 'Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah for Israel.' Vilate hearing the noise arose from her bed and came to the door; she had a smile on her face and she and Mary Ann Young cried out to us, 'Good bye, God bless you.' We returned the compliment and then told the driver to go ahead. After this I felt a spirit of joy and gratitude at having the satisfaction of seeing my wife standing upon her feet, instead of leaving her in bed, knowing as I did that I should not see them again for two or more years." Although too young to sense the deep anguish which our parents felt yet we children wept bitterly when our father came to bid us farewell, not knowing that we would ever see him again in the flesh. Both he and Brother Young were going away so sick they were unable to get into the wagon without assistance. The scene is so vivid before me that my eyes are blinded with tears as I try to write; but words fail to describe it. Our grief for a time was very great, but the knowledge that they were messengers of the Almighty to carry glad tidings to those who were in darkness that they also might be partakers of the blessings of the Gospel of salvation, sustained those who were left. The hymn containing these lines was often sung by us, and appropriate words they were in our desolate condition and they brought sweet comfort: "In every condition, in sickness, in health, In poverty's vale, or abounding in wealth; At home or abroad, on the land or the sea, As thy days may demand, so thy succor shall be. When through the deep waters I call thee to go, The rivers of sorrow shall not thee o'erflow, For I will be with thee thy troubles to bless, And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress."¹²

A was a full year passed before Helen Mar Whitney began to write about Nauvoo again for the readers of the *Woman's Exponent*. The articles appearing during the remainder of 1880 and the first part of 1881 were retrospective in nature. In July 1881, however, she began to write again about Nauvoo the Beautiful.

In this particular essay, Helen Mar recalls her movement from Quincy, Adams County, Illinois to the newly founded Church headquarters. Located some forty-

three miles south of Nauvoo, Quincy was a well-established community when the Saints sought refuge there from Missouri. The citizens of this thriving Illinois river town opened their homes and offered much-needed assistance and extraordinary compassion to these destitute people.

Even before the Saints began to arrive by the hundreds, Quincy was one of the largest cities in the state and was the county seat of Adams County. Quincy was reputed to be one of the finest towns on the upper Mississippi. Many families found the move from Quincy to the frontier community of Commerce very difficult, but nearly everyone realized the Saints had to have a home of their own. Helen Mar's account of this time period:

The site of Nauvoo from the river was considered one of the most beautiful on the Mississippi, and appropriately named Nauvoo, the beautiful. Previous to being settled by the Latter-day Saints it was called Commerce, or Upper and Lower Commerce, there having been two landings, which were quite a distance apart; the Prophet Joseph lived at the lower one, and our house was one mile from the river. When my father left us to go on his second mission to England there had been but very few houses built, and there were none within a half mile of us. We were surrounded with trees and hazel and other underbrush. The whole country was quite wild, and wolves being plentiful we were treated nightly to their serenades, commencing at sundown and continuing at intervals till morning. In the winter hunger made them very bold, but they were generally harmless. My first impression concerning the place was anything but pleasing; the circumstances attending my arrival there were probably the reason--the weather was excessively warm, and the bottom land being swampy, nearly every one who had come there was sick upon the bank of the river; my mother being in delicate health, father took her, with their youngest child, up by water, sending me and my eldest brother by land in charge of a hired woman and the driver; we were two days on the way, and the journey was quite pleasant; we put up at night with Father John Smith's family; Brother George A., their son, who was starting for England, accompanied us to Commerce on horseback, and I must say that he,

being afflicted with ague, looked a more fit subject for a hospital than he did like a missionary. Our parents expected to be there nearly as soon as we were, but remained in Quincy two or three days longer visiting among their friends; each day William and I walked to the upper landing, which was two miles or more from the place where we settled, and there being no houses between made the distance seem still greater, and having to return at night without them I felt homesick and sick of the country. The contrast between that place and Quincy, where we had spent the spring and summer so pleasantly, and everything seemed so delightful to me that it made the dreary looking place anything but interesting; but the scene changed as it were by magic, through the persevering industry of the Saints, and soon instead of a forest the country was dotted over with houses, and gardens and flowers were under cultivation.

Shortly after my father's departure for Europe, my little brother, upon whom we had depended to bring us water to drink as we lay sick with chills and fever, came in with his usual pail of water, and setting it upon the floor, laid down by it and said: "I b'leve I's goin' to have agu' too;" and sure enough the little fellow was shaking with it.

There is an old saying that "misery loves company," and we certainly had no lack of it in Nauvoo. Every remedy that could be thought or heard of was tried; we even resorted to tricks and stratagems, some of which were ludicrous in the extreme and afforded considerable fun and amusement. We sometimes tried selling or giving the ague to the ones who were willing to risk their chances, and the purchaser sometimes had cause to repent his or her bargain; but like the doctor's prescriptions they often failed. The following one had a striking effect upon me: when we began to feel the symptoms we were to start and run across the floor as if going on the bed, but to go under instead, thus cheating the old gentleman, who would go as usual on the bed. At the time my regular chill came on every other evening, and when I first felt the symptoms I started from the fireplace, but in dodging to go under the bed I gave my head a frightful blow, and I felt no

more of the chills and fever for three weeks; but whether it was due to the blow on my head or my faith in the trick I could never quite decide. The skin of a rattlesnake wrapped around the head was said to be an excellent remedy for the headache. One of our neighbors, Sister Bentley's father, killed an old one near our house, and after dressing it they cut it in pieces, and I saw the meat fried and eaten by her father and husband; they invited me to partake with them, but I had no hankering for snake meat, though it was as nice looking as fish, but the thought of it and the sight of the pieces squirming in the frying pan made me feel quite nervous; but when the fever was on and my head distracted with pain, I was perfectly willing to have it bound up with snake skins, or anything else that would give relief. None but those who have passed through similar sufferings can realize our conditions, as the days and weeks dragged on, and most of the Saints were destitute of the commonest comforts, and were wanting for beds and even coverings having been robbed in the State of Missouri, and the nights were very cold. We know how the ague weakens and reduces a person's strength in two or three days, but there we had it for weeks and months at a time, and there was no alternative but to submit and make the best of it. Wrapped in our shawls or quilts we would sit cramped and shaking to the very marrow, hovering over the fire, which only increased the shivering, but would not leave it as long as we could sit up, and when the fever came on the pain and suffering were so intense that the patient generally became delirious. Brother Joseph, seeing the condition of the Saints, especially those on the bank of the river, where the water was unfit for drinking purposes and they were dying like sheep, his sympathies were so wrought upon that he told them to make tea and drink it, or anything that they thought would do them good; and he often made tea and administered it with his own hands. That was the commencement of their using tea and coffee; previous to this the Saints had been strict in keeping the Word of Wisdom.

Soon after my father left us Brother Charles C. Rich, who purchased five acres of land adjoining ours, and Brother Charles Hubbard, with their wives, befriended my

mother and her children, and were truly brothers and sisters. Brothers Winchester, Benson, Uncle Joseph Young and many more brethren, with their families, soon became our neighbors, and were equally kind to us. During the first winter my mother invited them to hold meetings on the Sabbath day at her house, it being one of the most convenient in the neighborhood, though it had but one lower room and that was shared with Sister Pratt. The brethren and sisters enjoyed many glorious seasons together, and under the influence of the Holy spirit they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer for so pure riches, and they could say with truth, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light;" even the children partook of that influence, and were glad when the Sabbath day came round.¹³

This particular article is important in two significant ways. First, it recounts a story of life in Nauvoo from a young woman's vantage, and second, it tells us something of the day-to-day activities of the Saints. Most history focuses on economic and political issues, yet social history attempts to go beyond and beneath that well-proven type of history by revealing the private lives of people. And, in this recollection we see the world as it was understood by a young woman.

It is true that Helen Mar Whitney--like others who wrote of their experiences at the bend of the Mississippi River--was selective in what she recalled. Yet these serialized accounts published more than one hundred years ago allow us to hear the voices of people who experienced life with all its twists and turns as individuals. Each person responded differently to the personal and institutional crises of Nauvoo. But with all the individual drama, her narrative escapes the narrow egocentrism of many similar narratives written and published in nineteenth century America. This escape may be explained by the shared commitment to the Church and the strong bonds of community established by the Sister Saints at Nauvoo.

Whatever one finds in such personal recollections, they often provide a window to an amazing past that not only allows us to imagine a time and place that has been lost but also provides an opportunity to hear the "personal voice" of some remarkable and interesting human beings who lived in a world much different from ours.

NOTES

1. Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (15 November 1896):5.

2. Ibid.6.

3. See Sherilyn Cox Bennion, "The Woman's Exponent: Forty-Two Years of Speaking for Women," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1976): 222-39.

4. See Estelle C. Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986).

5. Helen Mar Whitney was not the only Latter-day Saint woman to agree to write her life story in 1880 as a "memorial" to the jubilee anniversary of the Church; see, for example, Mary Jane Mount Tanner, "Autobiography" (1837-1880), photocopy of typescript, LDS Church Archives.

6. *Woman's Exponent* (15 May 1880):188.

7. *Woman's Exponent* (15 June 1880):10.

8. *Woman's Exponent* (1 July 1880):18.

9. See Carol Cornwall Madsen, *In Their Own Words: Women and the Story of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1994):157-60.

10. *Woman's Exponent* (1 July 1880):18.

11. See, for example, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Jeni Broberg Holzapfel, *Women of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Inc., 1992).