

“AND SHOULD WE DIE”: A READER’S THEATER ON WINTER QUARTERS, NEBRASKA

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NARRATOR: “Stand in holy places” is the scriptural injunction to us all. Churches, we know, and temples; the Sacred Grove, where seventeen years ago we of the Mormon History Association celebrated the birth of Mormonism as a religion, and Hill Cumorah; the docks at Liverpool and the site of Haun’s Mill; Adam-ondi-Ahman and the temple site in Independence; Ensign Peak and Martin’s Cove—all are places made sacred to us by what transpired there. They are holy places that move us to remember the sacrifices made and to acknowledge the divine compulsions within us.

Here is another such place: the Mormon Cemetery near the banks of the Missouri River in Florence, Nebraska. A tiny lot, carefully fenced and tended, honors its dead with a poignant statue depicting a woman and a man bending over the grave of a baby. A plaque forms the ground on which the statue rests and bears the names of people known to have died and presumed to be buried here or near here—nearly six hundred, we read. More than that, suggest the writings of modern historians. The Latter-day Saints who were spread out along the trail from Nauvoo, on the Mississippi, to this place on the Missouri that first winter of the exodus experienced death as few groups ever have. Hardly a family remained untouched; some were all but obliterated. This place stands as a memorial to them all—the dead and those who mourned their dying.

These are the people whose names are preserved in brass here at our feet. Who were they in life? How can we know them? Let us share together the writings of

some who knew and loved those they lost here.

Here are two with a familiar surname, Woodruff. Wilford we know, and Phebe, his wife, but these names are Joseph and Ezra. Reading from Wilford Woodruff’s diary,¹ we not only discover who these are but also discover another name here, Jane Benbow, who, with her husband, John, twenty years earlier welcomed Elder Woodruff to their Herefordshire farm where he baptized them and hundreds more in their pond. Now, as both families gather to Zion in the American West, the Woodruffs, despite Wilford’s injuries from a woodcutting accident, are returning the care the Benbows showed them:

WILFORD WOODRUFF: [4 November 1846] Our little Joseph was taken sick this day. Had taken cold and settled upon his lungs. . . . I was enabled to walk to . . . Sister Benbow’s wagon where she lay very sick. Brother and Sister Benbow had been with us several days. Sister Benbow was exceedingly low when she came. Hardly expected she would live. Mrs. Woodruff, Phebe, used every exertion to nurse her up that she might recover.

[8 November 1846] I was enabled to walk to Dr. Richards’ tent today. Mrs. Woodruff has to spend her whole time day and night with Joseph, as he is in a dangerous situation. . . . Sister Benbow is also very low.

[11 November 1846] I spent several hours with Joseph. Supposed each moment to be his last but again revived at midnight.

[12 November 1846] We found our little boy was

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Tragedy at Winter Quarters

Monument at Winter Quarters Cemetery

failing and could not possibly hold out longer. . . . Sister Abbot took the main charge of him during the night, as Mrs. Woodruff's strength was mostly exhausted. He had suffered much from convulsions during his sickness, but he breathed his last and fell asleep this morning fifteen minutes before six o'clock. And we took his remains to the grave at four o'clock in the afternoon. We truly felt that we were called to make a great sacrifice in the loss of our son Joseph.

NARRATOR: Sacrifice, indeed, through the loss

of a fifteen-month-old child. But more was to be required.

WILFORD WOODRUFF: [Sunday, 29 November] We attended to the burial of Sister Benbow this day. Brother Benbow was not able to follow her to the grave. I went with my family.

NARRATOR: During her ministrations to her son, Joseph, and to her friend, Jane Benbow, Phebe Woodruff was herself in the last trimester of her pregnancy. A week after they buried Jane, and less than a month after Joseph's death, she gave birth. Wilford wrote:

WILFORD WOODRUFF: [8 December 1846] At half past three o'clock this morning, Mrs. Woodruff was delivered of a son, which was untimely six weeks before her time. The boy was alive, smart, and active; yet we cannot suppose him to live but a short time. We call his name Ezra. Mrs. Woodruff is doing as well as can be expected.

[10 November 1846] Ezra Woodruff died this evening at half past nine o'clock.

[11 November 1846] We attended to the burial of our child today, being about two days old when it died. This is the second son we have buried within a short time. Mrs. Woodruff is quite unwell.

NARRATOR: Months later, the poet Eliza R. Snow wrote verses to the still-mourning Woodruffs, as she had earlier for her friend, Eliza Partridge Lyman, whose baby, Don Carlos, had died along the trail:²

ELIZA R. SNOW:

Beloved Eliza, do not weep
Your baby sleeps a quiet sleep;
Altho' in dust its body lies
Its spirit soars above the skies.
No more upon your throbbing breast,
It lays its little head to rest
From all the pains of nature freed,
Your fond caress it does not need.

NARRATOR: One wonders what solace such verses held for the Woodruffs—or for Eliza Lyman, whose apostle-husband Amasa's duties had kept him away from his suffering wife and their sickly child. But the women had each other for comfort. Eliza Lyman wrote:³

ELIZA LYMAN: [12 December 1846] The baby is dead and I mourn his loss. We have done the best we knew how for him. . . . My sister Caroline and I sat up every night with him and tried to save him from death for we could not bear to part with him, but we were powerless. The Lord took him and I will try to be reconciled and think that all is for the best. . . . He was buried on the west side of the Missouri on the second ridge back, the eleventh grave on the second row counting from right to left, the first row being farthest from the river. This will be no guide, as the place cannot be found in a few years.

NARRATOR: And as her sister-wife had comforted her, six months after losing her own Don Carlos, Eliza Lyman wrote in her diary:⁴

ELIZA LYMAN: [1 June 1847] Sister Elvira Holmes' babe died. Received an invitation from Sister Holmes to come and spend the day with her, which I accepted. Visited with her the grave of her child.

NARRATOR: Hosea Stout, dark-haired police chief from Nauvoo and later in Winter Quarters, had already borne his share of grief for a dying child, his namesake little Hosea, who died and was buried on the trail:⁵

HOSEA STOUT: [Sunday, 28 June 1846] I awoke very early this morning and immediately discovered my child to be dying. He seemed perfectly easy and now had given up to the struggle of death and lay breathing out his life sweetly. . . . We had now only one child, a daughter, left and that was born on the road and what was its fate? Was it to be laid by the wayside also and we left utterly destitute and disconsolate?

NARRATOR: But Hosea's woes were not yet over. After arriving at Winter Quarters, he wrote of his plural wife Marinda:⁶

HOSEA STOUT: [Saturday, 26 September 1846]

Today was another unfortunate day to me—a day when the destroyer stalked forth triumphantly in my family and tore another one from our midst. Marinda, who had been very sick for some time, was taken worse last evening and delivered of a child, born dead, after which she seemed to have but little pain during the night. . . . She retained her senses perfectly well as long as she could hear or see and only seemed to drop to sleep. . . . She died about two o'clock p.m. She had ever been true and faithful to me from the first of our acquaintance . . ., which made this stroke of adversity more acutely felt by me and the rest of my family. . . . Whose turn will be next God only knows.

NARRATOR: It would be baby Louisa whose turn would be next. Born at Garden Grove just two months before her brother died, she lived just fifteen months and is buried here in Winter Quarters, near Marinda, her father's plural wife.

And on it goes, family after family. None so bereft, of course, as Stillman Pond—note the names on the plaque, and the dates:⁷ 2 December 1846, Laury Jane, age fourteen; 4 December, Harriet, age eleven; 7 December, Abigail, age eighteen. Three children, in four days. Then: 14 January 1847, Lyman, age six. And as though losing the children was not enough, the last Pond death recorded here is that of Almira, Stillman's wife, 17 May 1847, age thirty-four.

A similar story could be recounted of the family of Theodore Turley⁸ and his family or of John and Rhoda Lawrence.⁹ Three-year-old Angelina died 23 October 1846, followed three days later by her seven-month-old sister named Rhoda Elmira for her mother. Two months later, the girls' father, John Lawrence, died, followed in three months by his son John.

Interestingly, on the plaque is a dash representing the first name of one of a set of twins who died at birth.¹⁰ Adelia Harvey, says one; the other should read Adelbert, we discover in reading from the biography of their father as written by his granddaughter.

READER: Among those who died [at Winter Quarters] were the infant twins, Adelia and Adelbert, of John and Eliza [Harvey], born 16 March 1848. Of the six children born to them, only two had lived, and the young parents were so grief stricken that two weeks after the death of the twins, when a young mother died in giving birth to a daughter, they gladly took the orphan child

to raise. They named her Eliza Jane.

NARRATOR: And what of the young mother? Here she is on the plaque: Susannah Baker, age seventeen. Other than her parents' names and her date and place of birth, we know nothing of her. Nothing, that is, but the joy her daughter brought to her adoptive parents. Eliza Jane, now Harvey, grew to adulthood in Heber Valley, Utah, and became mother to a large posterity.¹¹

Of the Winter Quarters story, there is more than the shadow side. There are those, like Mary Haskin Parker Richards, who through their ministrations to their fellow refugees grew in love and service, in giving and belonging. Maurine Ward, who recently gave us the prize-winning volume, *Winter Quarters: The 1846-1848 Life Writings of Mary Haskin Parker Richards*, says:¹²

READER: Mary's journals depict a variety of service-related activities. Much of this devotion was directed to her husband's family, the extended Richards' family, with whom she traveled and lived. Daily duties to help her mother-in-law included doing laundry, ironing, sewing, baking, knitting, molding candles, churning, cleaning, packing, and unpacking. She also sewed vests, aprons, temple garments, dresses, handkerchiefs, and other articles of clothing for elderly aunts and uncles. She combed Uncle Willard's "head," made beds for Aunts Rhoda and Sarah, rubbed Aunt Rhoda with spirits, and read to Willard and Rhoda.

For weeks at a time Mary moved into the home of friends where she sewed or sat up nights with sick babies. Her charity is felt as she comforted mothers of dying children, sewed burial clothes, and prepared the infants for interment. In addition, Mary wrote letters for others, washed their dishes, baked their wedding cakes, and helped friends prepare for their upcoming trek to the Salt Lake Valley. And it is possible that one of her most unselfish traits of service was that of being a friend—visiting, listening, sharing, writing poetry, crying, and laughing.

NARRATOR: Cheerful and helpful as she was, Mary also knew sorrow through the lives of her dearest sister-in-law, Jane, and Jane's three-year-old daughter Wealthy and sister-wife Elizabeth.¹³

MARY HASKIN PARKER RICHARDS: [Sunday, 16 August 1846] I went and picked over some grapes and put them to cook [and] then went to meet

Jane. Met with her very sick; also little Wealthy and Elizabeth. Brought them into our tent and got supper for them. After supper I made Jane's bed for her and Father, assisted her to get back into the wagon. After washing the dishes and doing what was necessary to be done, I went and sat down and talked with Jane about one hour [and] then retired. Never was I more rejoiced to meet with a friend than I was to meet with Sister Jane, although it grieved me to the heart to see her and her child so much afflicted.

[Friday, 21 August 1846] Was very busy all day attending to Wolter's sick folks, also to Jane and Wealthy who [were] very sick. Stayed with them that night. Got up with Jane seven times.

[Saturday, 22 August 1846] Attended upon Jane and Wealthy. The former continued worse all the time. We doctored her with such things as we thought best for her. Was very sick all night. Got up with her nine times.

[Monday, 24 August 1846] Still attending on Sister Jane.

[Tuesday, 25 August 1846] With Jane until nine in the a.m., then laid down until one in the p.m.. Had a sweet sleep; then got up and washed me, and went back to Jane's wagon to take care of her. About four Uncle Willard called again, was very kind and consoling. With him we feasted on water and muskmelons, a very unexpected treat in the wilderness. He laid hands on Jane and Wealthy, blessed us all and departed. Night attended on Jane, who was still very sick today. Wealthy had a chill.

NARRATOR: So it continues the rest of the week until, with her still-optimistic outlook, Mary writes the last entry in this portion of her diary:

MARY HASKIN PARKER RICHARDS: [Friday, 28 August]: A beautyfull day.

NARRATOR: No diary entry records the death of little Wealthy two weeks later, but in a letter to her husband Samuel, Mary writes:¹⁴

MARY HASKIN PARKER RICHARDS: Oh, my dear, 'twas a distressing sight to see the affliction or sorrow that Jane endured at the death of her only (remaining) child. Wealthy was the first one laid in the new burying ground. Uncle Willard took us home with him to his own tent where we visited until the 20th. Uncle Willard is very kind; told me I was welcome to his table and home until you returned. He claims Jane and myself

for his children, and has promised to be a father to us both.

NARRATOR: And so the living and the dying continued—along with the burials in this sacred spot. As Eliza Roxcy Snow recorded in her diary:¹⁵

ELIZA R. SNOW: [13 May 1846] I saw the funeral train following to its wilderness grave a little child of Brother Turley. It was a lonely sight—my feelings truly sympathize with those who are called to leave their dear relatives by the way.

NARRATOR: And so must we all truly sympathize. And yet through the cauldron of sacrifice and loss emerged a people of such courage, such tenacity of purpose, such mutual sharing of responsibility, and such interdependence as a people of God that they could survive the next wilderness of their hejira and there build a kingdom that would not pass. Eliza Snow concluded, as the season of Winter Quarters drew to its close with the departure of the Saints for their new home: “This is truly a glorious time with the mothers and daughters in Zion.”¹⁶ What she wrote to one mourner might well apply to all:¹⁷

ELIZA R. SNOW:

All your works will be rewarded—
All your goodness be repaid—
Crowns of royalty await you—
Glorious crowns that will not fade.

NARRATOR: Here we stand, as we were instructed, in holy places. May this ground, hallowed with the bones of those who went before, sanctify to our good the memory of their suffering. “And should we die, before our journey’s through, Happy day! All is well!”¹⁸

Notes

1. Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 3:94-97.

2. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995), 149.

3. Eliza Maria Partridge Lyman, Diary, 12 December 1846, LDS Church Archives.

4. *Ibid.*, 1 June 1847.

5. Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout 1844-1861* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, University of Utah Press, 1982), 1:171.

6. *Ibid.*, 1:202.

7. Susan Easton Black, comp., *Inscriptions found on Tombstones and Monuments in Early Latter-day Saint Burial Grounds* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1981), 17.

8. *Ibid.*, 18.

9. *Ibid.*, 14,17.

10. *Ibid.*, 16.

11. Personal record of Lucille H. Ursenbach, in author’s files.

12. Extemporary remarks, based on the writings of Mary Haskin Parker Richards, given by Maurine Ward during the Reader’s Theater presentation at Winter Quarters Cemetery.

13. Maurine Carr Ward, ed., *Winter Quarters: The 1846-1848 Life Writings of Mary Haskin Parker Richards* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996), 89-90.

14. *Ibid.*, 92.

15. Beecher, 133.

16. *Ibid.*, 176.

17. Beecher, 157.

18. “Come, Come Ye Saints,” *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 30.