

**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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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*.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> "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."<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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







