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Mormon Midwife

Donna Smart

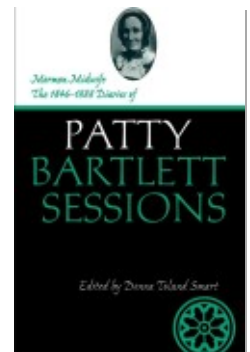
Published by Utah State University Press

Smart, Donna.

Mormon Midwife.

Utah State University Press, 1999.

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FOREWORD

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher

Reading the diary of a woman is like visiting across the back fence on a summer afternoon. While your wash dries on the line, and her garden awaits the seeds she is planting, you chat about the things that matter to each of you: your new carpet, her problem with the car, her daughter who is about to marry, your son who seems unable to find directions in his life, the neighbor whose husband recently died, and whether or not the town council will fix the potholes in the road this spring. Of just such topics is a woman's life filled; of such things she writes in her diary. The events and circumstances, the concerns and achievements of a woman's life are as worthy the attention of historians as are the doings of governments and corporations, generally the domain of men. Public and private and male and female worlds overlap, but as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich observed in the introduction to her Pulitzer Prize study, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard*, there are areas of both which have not in the past been deemed of interest—the details of the day to day activities of men and women, for example, but especially the domestic affairs of women. And, as Ulrich noted, “it is in the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness, that the real power of Martha Ballard's book lies.”¹

Patty Bartlett Sessions, like Martha Ballard, was a Maine midwife. Two generations apart in lifespans, the two women shared many concerns, which each recorded in her notebook alongside the requisite notations of birthings attended. Characteristic of her time, Martha began and ended her life in Maine. Not untypical of her later time, Patty participated in the westward movement of eastern Americans, ending her life two thousand miles from Maine, in the valleys of the Rocky Mountains. What they shared was the world of women, a geography which knows no boundaries of time or space.

1. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 9.

The diaries of Patty Sessions have long enriched historians' views of the formation of the western Zion. As in her proud declaration, upon completing her 1847 hejira to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, that she had driven her wagon "all the way but part of the two last mts [mountains]" and that she "broke nothing nor turned over," Patty speaks clearly of her important part in the move.² Accounts such as hers present evidence of women's involvement in commerce, education, government, and the courts, as well as the domestic and the religious worlds. Untold stories of the development of the American West are available in the life writings of women, and contemporary scholars are anxious to recover them for their value to historical analysis.

Women's life writings, though, are more than just the raw data that historians, sociologists, anthropologists, or economists may draw from them. They are literary texts in their own right. In each one a woman's life is revealed; each is as worthy of sympathetic reading as any more polished biography and is perhaps even more rewarding for coming from the subject's own pen. As such texts, they speak to the inner life of the reader.

Unmediated discourse of writer to reader is attempted here. Editorial background is provided where necessary but without modifying the author's own text. Only the form of print has changed; the reader may enjoy the lines without struggling to decipher sometimes tiny and confusing handwritten script. Approach this text, then, and those that follow in the series, with confidence in the veracity of its rendering. Read with interest, with forbearance, and with compassion—with reverence for the life disclosed.

Whether regarded as document or text, the life writing of a frontier woman can expand the lives of its readers. It is the hope of the editors that such will be the case with the present volume, *Mormon Midwife: The 1846–1888 Diaries of Patty Bartlett Sessions*, volume 2 of the series *Life Writings of Frontier Women*.

2. Patty Sessions, *Diary One*, 25 September 1847.