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Mormon Midwife

Donna Smart

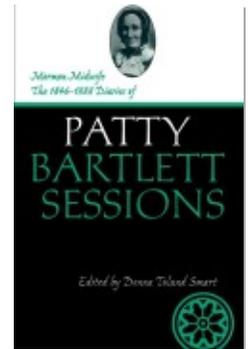
Published by Utah State University Press

Smart, Donna.

Mormon Midwife.

Utah State University Press, 1999.

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EPILOGUE

As far as we know, Patty Bartlett Sessions's sketchy May 1888 entries were her last written words. According to her diary, she wrote many letters throughout the years. Probably few survive. The Daughters of Utah Pioneers have one damaged photocopy of a letter she wrote from "Camp of Isriel Winter Quarters" to daughter Sylvia and her husband Windsor Lyon and son David Sessions, Jr., in Nauvoo. It was dated 12 December 1846 and recounted some of the events mentioned in her diary, as well as urging Windsor to move his store to Winter Quarters since, she reported, people had to make three or four trips to the one church store to get waited on. She quoted some prices, such as "molasses one dollar per gallon sugar six pound for a dollar salt 1-75 per barrel groceries are high dry goods but little higher than in Nauvoo sheeting from 12 1/2 to 16 cts per yd. . . ."

Other information about her comes from secondary contemporary accounts. The name Patty Sessions appears in the 9 October 1859 "Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" among the winners of premium awards at the exhibition of the Deseret Agricultural and Manufacturing Society: Best Knit Cape and Crochet Bed Spread (woolen), achievements she failed to note in her diaries. The *Deseret Almanac for the Year of our Lord 1852*, compiled by W. W. Phelps, lists her name on the same page with "Officers in the Priesthood of the Church"—the presidency and other general authorities. Names of officers of the Council of Health include Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Willard Richards as "Ex-officio Presidents," with W. A. Morse as "President," P. Richards as "Recorder," and P. Meeks as "Pres.t, p.t." Phebe Angel is named as "Presidentess" and Patty (Sessions) Parry and Susanna S. Richards as "Counsellors." On the death of Phebe Angel, Patty was chosen as "presidentess."

Samuel W. Taylor gives Patty credit for a letter to the editor of Nauvoo's newspaper, *Times and Seasons*, of 15 September 1843. "It was signed 'P—S,'" he wrote, "but everyone knew the author was Patty Sessions, for the midwife had been frank in expressing her views about doctors." He relates her story about

a Revolutionary patriot who lived to be ninety-nine. "He took no medicine until after he was eighty years old. From this fact alone," P—S railed, "it is possible that if he had taken no medicine at all, he might have lived to be as old as Moses, one hundred and twenty years."¹ It's doubtful Patty wrote the letter attributed to her; if she did, the editor took great license with her content and style. But now the reader of her diaries is free to make judgment based on an acquaintance with what we *know* she wrote.

As a matter of fact, she has been quoted, misquoted, extolled, and misrepresented numerous times by well-meaning people who have rightly wanted to give her her due. Many other persons have also been the beneficiaries of such efforts. For years filling in the gaps has been an elusive goal for historians and families.

Patty sometimes adds to the mysteries about herself by omitting information. For example her diaries mention only briefly the school she built for her grandchildren and other children whose parents were unable to afford the expenses of education. An article, "Patty Sessions' School" in the *Deseret Evening News* of 20 December 1883 gives more details. The dedication was held on 15 December, the meeting was called to order by Brother Henry Rampton, and the dedicatory prayer was offered by P. G. Sessions. As she addressed the meeting, Patty named a board of directors: P. G. Sessions; John Fisher, who was married to her granddaughter Josephine; and LEMONIA HOLBROOK.² Patty explained that she had "\$16,000 invested in ZCMI at Salt Lake City. The school committee were to see that a sufficient portion of the dividends was kept out to pay the expenses of the school." The *Deseret News* described the schoolhouse as "a brick building 18x36, with a twelve-foot ceiling and well finished and furnished."

The "Journal History" quotes frequently from Patty's diary in 1847. David Sessions is mentioned occasionally, as are many of the persons whose names appear in Patty's writings.

Although she wrote in a kind of outline style, Patty daily shared consistent and dependable information. She sketched a remarkable portrait of one pioneering woman caught up in the often dramatic historical events that were swirling around everyday Mormon life during the last half of the nineteenth century.

It would be nice to conclude her story with details of her last years, neatly packaged. But so far there is no clue as to what those last four and a half

1. Samuel W. Taylor, *Nightfall at Nauvoo* (New York: Avon, 1971), 190.
2. This was probably Joseph Lamoni Holbrook, who became the first mayor of Bountiful upon its incorporation in 1894. As the reader has undoubtedly noticed, Patty had a tendency to add *ia* to names that ended in *a*. The most obvious example is substituting "Lucinia" for the name of Perrigrine's wife Lucina.

years were like—her health, her caregivers, her mental and emotional condition. Perhaps her final years were much like all the others, except marked by poorer health and increasing infirmity. Perhaps Perrigrine's wife Betsey nursed her to the end. The obituary "Almost a Hundred" in the *Deseret Evening News* of 14 December 1892 states simply that she died at her home "at 6:30 o'clock this (Wednesday) morning of old age."

Some years later in 1898, her daughter-in-law, Phebe C. Sessions, wrote a rather sentimental biographical sketch of Patty, which was published in the *Woman's Exponent* (27:6). It acknowledged some of Patty's many accomplishments but didn't discuss her life after the diaries ended.

On 14 December 1892 the "Journal History" published a life sketch that included the numbers of her posterity. "She lived to see her fourth generation and has left two sons, thirty-three grandchildren, one hundred and thirty-seven great grandchildren, and twenty-two great great grandchildren. Total posterity, 214. She was ever a true and faithful Latter-day Saint, diligent and persevering, her whole soul, and all she possessed being devoted to the Church and the welfare of mankind. She has gone to her grave ripe in years, loved and respected by all that knew her."³

For one who kept such copious records as Patty, it is strange that a will is not on file in the county recorder's office. Perhaps because of that, Patty's estate was not settled until 28 February 1900. A. L. Burnham, Carlos L. Sessions, and Fabyan C. Sessions, grandsons, acted as administrators. The belongings were sold, consisting of stock in ZCMI, an organ, stove and pipe, twenty-four wooden benches, and a map (most of which probably came from the school). Her real estate was sold as well. The amount to be distributed after all expenses were paid totaled \$6,079.25. It was equally allocated among the families of Perrigrine, Sylvia, and David, by then all deceased; each family inherited approximately \$2,026.40. Since Perrigrine had fathered the most children, the dollars were thin by the time his children and grandchildren claimed their shares, but all received something.

Although her diligent labor and business acumen allowed Patty to amass a small fortune for her day, her legacy is worth more than dollars and cents. She left an example of sacrifice, determination, industriousness, austerity, dedication, drive—all these and more—sharply etched in her diaries. That legacy lives on for her posterity and all who gain any degree of personal or historical insight through what she recorded. At the very least, those records confirm that Patty Sessions was a valuable cog in building the Salt Lake Valley.

3. "Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," Archives of the Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

Salt Lake City was the subject of a syndicated column by Georgie Anne Geyer, published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on 30 May 1996.⁴ Geyer's present perception also fits the place Patty Sessions described 150 years ago. Geyer writes

And so, of all the interesting things about the "Mormon state," perhaps the part that would be most wisely attended to by the rest of the nation is this public propensity—and this unstated inner passion—for cooperativeness in place of competitiveness, for harmony instead of adversariness, and for connectedness in lieu of disconnectedness.

Patty knew about being cooperative and harmonious. She maintained strong connections with her family, her church, and her community. Patty also provides a connection for us. Her moments in time as chronicled in her diaries could be our own in their ordinariness and significance; in their transience and permanence.

Geyer continues her column by quoting from her own 1996 commencement address at Westminster College in Salt Lake City.

If you don't know history . . . you are a prisoner of your time and place; you don't know what came before, so you can never know what will come next. You've lost the knowledge of the origins of things. You're frozen in "me," and most often in "now," when it should be "we" and "forever."

Patty valued her origins and looked toward "forever" with optimism. Because her capable hands dealt daily with life and death as midwife and medical provider for the community, she lived with a serious sense of urgency and preparation. Her contributions to the well-being of her contemporaries cannot be overemphasized. But she did not neglect other important aspects of daily living. As she took care of her "domestic concerns," she also shared her skills and the fruits of her labors with her immediate family circle and with the larger community. She thrived on work and freely expressed satisfaction in work done well enough to satisfy her own high standards. When she realized a profit from her medical skills and from the fruits of her gardens and orchards, a necessity if she was to be self-sufficient, she valued her accomplishment. And being an astute businesswoman, she invested any surplus wisely.

Patty gave much simply out of an innate goodness and a desire to use her considerable talents and means to serve others. She earned a place as a leader among women in spiritual and practical ways. Called by her bishop to

4. "Good Example Found in Salt Lake City," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 30 May 1996, A13.

be a leader in providing relief for Indian women and children, she enthusiastically responded. She was a charter officer in the remarkably foresighted Council of Health. Being naturally good-hearted, she helped others with time as well as with material goods.

Despite these obvious accomplishments and others that could be cited, however, Patty's greatest contributions are still her diaries, on-the-spot chronicles of the Mormon trail experience and of life in early Utah. She was no prisoner of time and place. She kept track of her origins and never wavered from her firm belief in the here and now and the future hereafter. She leaves much to ponder, to admire, and, yes, to emulate.

