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Worth Their Salt Too

Colleen Whitley

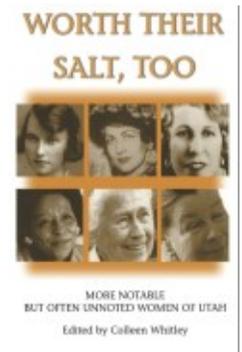
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ESTHER ROMANIA BUNNELL
PRATT PENROSE
An Uphill Climb

Shana Montgomery

Shana Foster Montgomery was born in St. Anthony, Idaho, and now lives in Holladay, Utah. She holds a B.A. in English from Brigham Young University. In addition to her interest in history and biography, Montgomery has studied painting and vocal music. She has sung with the Utah Symphony Choral and currently sings with the Jay Welch Chorale. Her friends, neighbors, and family, however, say her chief hobby is doing things for them. Like many women, she constantly faces the choices of family and career, and so she is fascinated by Romania Pratt because she “did not limit herself. She believed she could do it all and she did.”

With a shake of her head, the sixteen-year-old girl loosened her dark hair in the early morning breeze. She stooped to pick a handful of wild flowers before beginning her ascent up the hill before her. She swung her arms determinedly as she fell into a steady climbing rhythm, one foot after another, until she reached the summit and gazed a little breathlessly at the wagon train just breaking camp below. She waved and then watched the sun rise above the horizon.

Among the many notable women in Utah's history, few were more determined to succeed than Romania Pratt Penrose, the first Mormon woman to receive her doctor of medicine degree.¹ With the same resolute determination she had displayed crossing the plains to

Utah in 1855, Romania studied to further her education in languages and music to prepare herself to become a teacher. It was her deep desire to relieve suffering that gave her the strength to sacrifice so much to study medicine, and it was her commitment to help build Zion that gave her the faith to accept whatever call came from the prophet, whether in auxiliary leadership, polygamy, or a mission.² Successfully realizing these goals was an uphill climb for Romania, but her determination and faith sustained her as evidenced by her own words: "It has become a trite but true saying that there is no excellence without great labor. God virtually says to each of us, 'The world is before you. Be as good and great as you will, and I will assist you.'"³

Romania was born on a farm in Indiana on 8 August 1839, to Esther Mendenhall Bunnell and Luther B. Bunnell. Both parents embraced the gospel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by the time Romania was six years old, and when she was seven, the family moved to Nauvoo, Illinois, to gather with the rest of the Saints. However, 1846 was not a good year in Nauvoo; persecutions drove the Saints across the Mississippi River, and Brigham Young was forced to lead his people into Iowa. As preparations continued for the Saints' journey west, Romania's father prepared to return to Ohio because Esther's health was delicate. She had recently given birth to a second daughter, Josephine, and Luther thought it wise to postpone the journey west.⁴

He farmed for three years more until news came of the gold strike in California. In 1849, Mr. Bunnell left his wife and four children for the Pacific coast. The first of many difficult hills to climb presented itself before Romania when her father contracted typhoid fever and died before he could return to his family. She was ten years old. Mrs. Bunnell then took her children back to Indiana.⁵

It was there at the female seminary at Crawfordsville, Indiana that Romania's thirst for knowledge first became evident. She studied music, painting, German, and other languages, in addition to the general branches of education, until she was sixteen. She recalled that she would have "obtained a very finished education; but my looming womanhood began to draw around me admirers which warned mother to flee from Babylon before I became fastened by Gentile bonds."⁶

So in May of 1855, Esther Bunnell sold her home and took Romania, Josephine, and her two sons, Luther and Isaac, to join the

Saints. They met Captain John Hindley's wagon train of fifty in Omaha and began the difficult four-month journey to the Salt Lake Valley, a journey which Romania seemed to take in stride. "The journey across the plains with ox teams was a summer full of pleasure to me; the early morning walks gathering wild flowers, climbing the rugged and oftentimes forbidding hills—the pleasant evening gatherings of the young folks by the bright camp fire while sweet songs floated forth on the evening air to gladden the wild and savage ear of the red men or wild beasts as well as our own young hearts."⁷

The party's arrival in the valley on 3 September 1855 presented new kinds of challenges for Romania. They camped on Union Square, which later became the University of Deseret, and they soon learned that the Saints were in the midst of a grasshopper-induced famine. Romania said that "for the first time in life did I face its [famine's] stern realities."⁸ The Bunnells arrived in the valley with little; however, Esther was thrifty and industrious and soon began taking in laundry and doing miscellaneous tasks for the neighbors. Romania earned money by teaching in Brigham Young's school.

Two years later, word came that the family could receive money from the Bunnell estate in Indiana, so Esther left Romania in charge and journeyed back to Indiana to collect the inheritance. Upon her return Mrs. Bunnell brought, among other household comforts, a piano for the daughter who had so faithfully performed the duties of a mother while she was away. It was one of the first pianos brought to Utah, and Romania prized it highly.⁹

In her twentieth year Romania married a "son of promise," Parley P. Pratt Jr., eldest son of apostle Parley P. Pratt. Romania's husband had been born under unusual circumstances: his mother, Thankful, had been childless for the first nine years of her marriage. When his father, Parley, was called on a mission to Canada, Thankful's illness and their heavy indebtedness had filled their minds with doubts. Apostle Heber C. Kimball paid them a visit and gave Thankful a blessing, promising that if Parley would go on his mission, the way would be opened for him to pay his debts and to do a great work in Canada, which work would later spread to England. He also promised Thankful that within a year she would bear a son and call his name Parley. The fulfillment of the promised birth came in Kirtland on 25 March 1837, when Thankful gave birth to Parley Jr. She died soon afterward.¹⁰

Perhaps now that she was married, Romania hoped her life would be filled with happiness and easier times, but this would not be the case. Two years after his marriage to Romania, Parley was called to labor in the Eastern States Mission. A short time after his return he was called to England and was gone for four difficult years, leaving Romania to support herself and two-year-old Parley Jr. as best she could, while expecting another child. The baby was born, and he lived only three days; Romania sadly buried Luther, named for her father, in the Salt Lake Cemetery.¹¹ It was only her faith that sustained her. In her journal she wrote: "I do not remember having any other faith than that of the true and everlasting gospel. It has been a matter of great satisfaction to me to remember how fully and easily I received all the principles of the gospel even from my earliest recollection. I can truly say I do not remember when I did not believe. It is not a part of the plan of creation for man to have gratuitously bestowed upon him the fruits of great energy and labor, but our agency is given us and the wide world full of opportunities by which we can prove our worthiness in the future and all are left without excuse . . . surely such sacrifices must be only for the love of the true God."¹²

Upon Parley's return, the Pratts added five children to their family. Her sons lived to maturity, but an only daughter died when she was less than two years old and caused Romania lingering sorrow that she would recall many years afterward.

After a quarter of a century of colonizing, Utah had produced many midwives but no trained women doctors. Yet due to the strict moral code of conduct, male doctors were seldom called in to attend to female diseases and childbirth. Thus women doctors were needed. Recognizing that need, Mormon leader Brigham Young issued a plea from his pulpit in 1873 for women to study medicine.¹³

Romania was thirty-three years old when she heard Brigham Young's plea, and it appealed to her great love of learning and literary pursuits. But it also appealed to her great sorrow over the loss of her babies and other people she had known. She had once watched a close friend die: "I saw her lying on her bed, her life slowly ebbing away, and no one near knew how to ease her pain or prevent her death; it was a natural enough case, and a little knowledge might have saved her. Oh, how I longed to know something to do, and at that moment I solemnly vowed to myself never to be found in such a position again, and it was

my aim ever afterward to arrange my life work that I might study the science which would relieve suffering, appease pain, prevent death.”¹⁴

Besides her desire to relieve suffering, Romania also desired to help build Zion, and Brigham Young’s request was the incentive she needed to make the necessary sacrifices. She sold her piano and her home and left her children, Parley Jr., age fourteen; Louis, age eight; Mark, age four; Irwin, age two; and baby Roy, less than a year old, in the loving care of her mother.¹⁵ She boarded the train in December of 1873 and began the climb up a long and difficult hill, a journey that would cost her dearly but would ultimately bring her greatest rewards and satisfaction when she finally graduated as a doctor of medicine in March of 1877.

By the second half of the nineteenth century women practitioners were just beginning to be recognized on a somewhat equal level with male physicians. America reluctantly produced the first woman doctor, Elizabeth Blackwell from Bristol, England, in 1849. She had made numerous attempts to enter several colleges of medicine. To one of her applications for admittance to study, one professor frankly replied, “You cannot expect us to furnish you with a stick to break our heads with.”¹⁶ The first American woman to gain a medical degree was Lydia Fowler, in 1850. That same year witnessed the beginning of the Quaker-founded Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia, the first chartered accredited female medical school in the United States.¹⁷ Thirteen short years later, Romania Pratt entered the relatively new field of medicine for women, first at the Women’s Medical College in New York, and then the Woman’s Medical College in Philadelphia.

Because the semester was nearing its completion, Romania primarily observed when she first arrived. However, through the private tutelage she received during the summer and in her classes, she soon distinguished herself as a leader in the freshman class. She especially excelled at dissection, which was one of the most formidable challenges for most women students. The cost of dissecting a cadaver was forty dollars, which was split by a “club” of four girls who worked as a team. Romania lived in a small, cramped room for which she paid one dollar per week. Matriculation and lab fees as well as the one dollar per hour fee for medical instruction combined to make the cost of continuing in medical school prohibitive to Romania.¹⁸

Spring came, and with her freshman year over, Romania returned to the Salt Lake Valley, where she “had the joy of the society of my children

and the Saints.”¹⁹ Her finances had been depleted, however, and in desperation she called on President Brigham Young. He, in turn, called Eliza R. Snow to him and said regarding Romania: “She must continue her studies in the east. We need her here, and her talents will be of great use to this people. Take this upon yourself, Sister Eliza, to see to it that the Relief Societies furnish Sister Pratt with the necessary money to complete her studies. Let them get up parties and thus provide the means.”²⁰

All through that summer Romania enjoyed caring for her family, and at the same time she accepted the responsibilities of president of the Young Ladies Retrenchment Association in the Salt Lake Twelfth Ward. In the fall she returned east to complete her studies with her finances secured, money she would eventually repay in full.

For the next two years Romania took courses in obstetrics and diseases of women, anatomy, chemistry and toxicology, principles and practice of medicine, surgery, *materia medica*, physiology and hygiene, microscopy and histology, and dentistry.²¹ Romania later recalled the difficulty of the days of study at medical school. She said that all days “seemed so much alike that it was as one long day.”²²

In her senior year, Romania completed her courses of study and wrote a thesis entitled “Puerperal Hemorrhage [*sic*], Its Cause and Cure.” She successfully passed all of her examinations and defended her thesis before her professors and also before the student body, making it possible for her to graduate on 15 March 1877, at the age of thirty-eight.²³ She recalls the difficulty of her educational journey: “At last the winter days were over and those who successfully passed their examinations stood on the heights of the rugged hill we had been climbing waving joyfully the flag ‘Excelsior.’ On March 15, 1877, one of the most eventful days of my life arrived, my graduation day. As we sat on the brow of the hill I mentally offered up a prayer asking our Father to so bless me that I might fully appreciate the privilege I then enjoyed. Dressed in black and with throbbing hearts we repaired to Association Hall.”²⁴

Romania’s vacations between winter terms had been spent in the hospital for women in Boston, and after graduation she remained in Philadelphia to continue her studies of the eye and ear. These additional courses gave her the distinction of being one of the earliest physicians to specialize. But instead of traveling home immediately upon completion of these courses, she journeyed to Bloomington, Indiana, to take care of her sister, Josephine, who was expecting a baby. She also, at the request

of Brigham Young's son John, visited the Elmira Water Cure, a popular health retreat, for a month. Her stay with Josephine necessarily lengthened into two months, and when she was finally able to leave Bloomington she was very anxious.²⁵

I had now been from home nearly two years and none except those having experience can know my joy when I felt I really was homeward bound. The journey was long and wearisome though of only a few days. I arrived home September 18, and found my home still, quiet and empty, but hearing voices in the orchard I wandered back and found my dear, faithful mother and two youngest children gathering fruit. My heart was pierced with sorrow when my little ones opened wide their eyes in wonder and with no token of recognition of their mother. I wept bitterly that I had been forgotten by my babes. Very soon all my dear children were gathered around me and we soon renewed old acquaintances and affections.²⁶

Being four years away from her children and suffering the temporary loss of their affections would not be the greatest sacrifice Romania would be called upon to make for her medical degree, however. In the year of her return, her husband had taken Brighamine Nealson as a plural wife. But, as in all the trials and tests she received in the church, she accepted this call as yet another upward climb and met it with her usual faith and determination:

Even the principle of plural marriage seemed a most rational and eternal truth. I never opposed the principle when practiced with singleness of heart as commanded. Were it lived according to the great and grand aim of its author, though it be a fiery furnace at some period of our life, it will prove the one thing needful to cleanse and purify our inmost soul of selfishness, jealousy and other mundane attributes which seem to lie closest to the citadel of life. With these uncongenial attendants we never can enter and remain in the Celestial Kingdom of our Father, therefore if we can use this as a refining element let us accept it as a means of salvation. Plural marriage is the platform upon which is built endless kingdoms and lives and no

other or all combined principles revealed can be substitutes as a compensation. It is only our want of knowledge that we do not hail it as our greatest gift, and be stimulated to fight the warfare of this earthly life and prove ourselves conquerors to march onward in the upward scale of eternal lives.²⁷

A woman of ability, Dr. Pratt set about to establish herself professionally. With her specialization in eye and ear infirmity, she was soon considered the authority in the state and patients came to her with their maladies. She has been credited with performing the first successful cataract operation in the territory.²⁸

A medical authority among women, Romania was approached by a committee, headed by Zina D. H. Young, to conduct classes in obstetrical science, and with dedication she opened a series of lectures. She subsequently taught hundreds of eligible women who later contributed their skills to the small communities. She wrote articles for the *Woman's Exponent*, and her articles on hygiene also became a regular feature in the *Young Woman's Journal*.

Because she was a woman and a doctor ahead of her time, Romania embarked on yet another cause with determination and zeal. She wrote an article in the *Exponent* in 1879, on woman suffrage. She said it was a woman's "duty and privilege to do whatever she can that will promote the advancement and elevation of her own sex."²⁹ She spoke to a large audience in Ogden City Hall and told them that "it is good to become self-sustaining and have a complete knowledge of some branch of work. . . . [A woman] must work her way up to the position she desires to fill in life [keeping in mind that] her mission as a mother is a sacred one."³⁰ She later wrote in the *Young Woman's Journal*, "Why not let capacity and ability be the test of eligibility and not sex?"³¹ She continued, "In a nutshell our duties as suffragists are to inform ourselves and instruct each other in the science of government, to interest all our friends in the movement, and convert our fathers, brothers and husbands to the fact that we can understand and wield an intelligent power in politics, and still preside wisely and gracefully at home."³²

In the same *Exponent* article, she asked her readers, "Is law a protection or a guide, or is it a vicious weathercock set up on the cross roads, pointing the road just as the wind may blow? . . . It is high time women set a high price on all her works and abilities, and see which bill foots up the highest."³³

In 1881, after twenty-two years of marriage, Romania concluded that she and Parley should be divorced. It is difficult to ascertain the reasons for this decision. Parley had never been able to support the family because of his delicate health and his frequent absence, and Brighamine now had children that needed any support Parley could give. The years of separation in early marriage while Parley was on his missions and later as Romania attended medical school had likely alienated the Pratts and had probably added to Romania's decision for a final separation.³⁴

Alone, but certainly not abandoned nor discouraged, she was called that same year to be the treasurer of the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association of the Salt Lake Stake. She was given a blessing with this calling by church president Joseph F. Smith in which he asked God to bless her "with the light, wisdom and power of His Holy Spirit in your occupation as a doctor, as a midwife, as a teacher of obstetrics and of medicine and of all things connected therewith."³⁵

In 1882, after many years of effort, the Relief Society established the Deseret Hospital in Salt Lake City and President John Taylor dedicated it. A benefit was held in the Tabernacle that same year, and the building was illuminated with eight electric lights, "the effect being intensely beautiful."³⁶ This hospital served the people of Utah for twelve years, both as a hospital and center of health and hygiene. Maintenance depended on voluntary contributions, annual memberships of one dollar per family, and fees from patients, which included cash and commodities such as chickens and pigs. Over four hundred operations, including most of the major surgeries, were performed there. Dr. Pratt served on the professional staff of the Deseret Hospital from the beginning as visiting surgeon on the eye and ear. However, because of lack of funds, the hospital closed in 1893.³⁷

Romania Pratt had now seen all her aspirations come true. Through her own determination, she had raised her five sons. She had obtained an enviable education even by today's standards. She had received her doctoral degree, and she had served wherever she was called in her church and had seen Zion grow. Then in 1886, at the age of forty-seven, she became the third wife of Charles W. Penrose. They would have a close and endearing relationship until his death in 1925.

Charles worked as the editor of the *Deseret News*; he went on to become assistant church historian, a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, and a second counselor in the First Presidency of the

Mormon Church to both Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant.³⁸ During the busy years of their marriage—when Romania had a heavy medical practice in addition to her writing and teaching, and when Charles was required to spend many hours on church business—they still managed time together. They loved to attend the theater and travel together; Romania was well suited to be the wife of an apostle. She was well respected for her work in medicine and suffrage, and she was also a spiritual leader. She served as general secretary of the Relief Society.³⁹ Susa Young Gates, a long-time friend, described Romania in 1891 as a

wonderful woman. Not because she has done anything impossible to be done by other women, but because in becoming a doctor able to sever a limb, or take out an eye, now delivering a woman, then attending with gentlest care the sick bed of some poor old man at the hospital, yet with it all she has a home on another street where she keeps a corner warm and cozy for mother and her unmarried boys; also is she a woman with religious duties devolving upon her shoulders, and with it all she is the same sweet, quiet-voiced, gentle lady that my childish memory so vividly produces. She is loved and honored by all who have the pleasure of her acquaintance and their name is legion.⁴⁰

On 8 August 1889, Romania was given a surprise party to celebrate her fiftieth birthday. Speeches were given and a large photograph album was presented to her. Dr. Ellis Shipp paid tribute to her determination, her strength, and her faith: “In you we recognize many gifts and graces that glorify the character of women. We admire your talents, we honor your undaunted courage and perseverance in toiling alone up the rugged hill of science, opening the path to a higher and broader field of usefulness for your sex. . . . It was said of Napoleon that he could win battles but Josephine had achieved the greater success for she could win hearts; the presence of so many appreciative friends assembled here tonight to honor your Jubilee proves that you have learned the art known to the charming.”⁴¹

But Romania did not rest on her laurels. In January of 1907, she and Charles left Salt Lake City to preside over the European Mission for the LDS Church. Romania organized branches of the Relief Society

while traveling through Europe. She wrote to the *Exponent*, delighting her readers with her descriptions of the Rhine, the towns and villages and castles, the grape vineyards, and towers, “gray and ice-covered, full of mystery.”⁴²

While in Europe, Romania was appointed by Utah governor John Cutler to attend the Woman’s International Suffrage Alliance held at Amsterdam on 15 June 1908, where representatives were in attendance from all the civilized countries of the world. Romania addressed the convention and spoke about suffrage in the West. In May of the following year she was again asked to participate in the International Alliance representing the western states.⁴³

Upon their release from the mission in 1910, Romania and Charles moved into their home at 1175 South Ninth East in Salt Lake City. Though advanced in years, they hosted many family gatherings, attended the Salt Lake Theatre often, and traveled to Saltair, the Chicago World’s Fair, and California.⁴⁴ Romania returned to her medical practice for a short time, but she found she was too busy to continue her practice and retired in 1912 after thirty-five years as a practicing physician.⁴⁵ Charles continued vigorously in his work as counselor in the Mormon Church First Presidency until his death on 17 May 1925.

Toward the end of her life, Romania became blind and finally died on 9 November 1932, at the age of ninety-three. She was survived by four sons, ten grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.⁴⁶ Romania Pratt Penrose’s life was an inspiration. She mastered all the challenges of a long, complicated, and surprise-filled life. She explored every opportunity presented to her and achieved all her dreams. She was intelligent, strong-willed, and committed. She toiled alone up rugged hills where few women had gone before with undaunted determination and faith in God, yet in all this she never compromised her womanhood. Before his death, Charles penned these words in a poem as a tribute to Romania:

Peace be to thee, and lengthened life
Eternal bliss and glory given.
A loved and loving honored wife
Thou shalt be crowned, in earth and heaven!⁴⁷



Camilla Cobb introduced Frobel's principles of early childhood education to the children of Utah. Facsimile photograph by Nelson B. Wadsworth, courtesy of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers.