Mormon Midwife

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INTRODUCTION

In May of 1888 Patty Bartlett Sessions wrote the words “it is now Friday the 4th,” put down her pen as if for a temporary pause, and abruptly ended more than four decades of diary entries. The Mormon pioneer trek from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Salt Lake Valley; the rise of Mormon cities in the western wilderness; the attempted invasion of Johnston’s army; the coming of the railroad; and the building of Mormon temples represent only a few of the significant events mentioned in her annals. The domestic life of a people was the more continuous substance of her record. She lived on until 14 December 1892 and died less than two months before her ninety-eighth birthday.

Patty was a compulsive record keeper. Although diaries dating from the Nauvoo exodus of February 1846 compose this volume, evidence points to her having kept a journal much earlier—perhaps starting soon after she married David Sessions on 28 June 1812. Unfortunately, those records have disappeared. Evidence also suggests the esteem she earned among her peers throughout the years; between 1 September 1884 and 15 November 1885, the Woman’s Exponent, a Utah magazine devoted to the cause of women, published a series of eight articles based on her life.1 It recorded that Patty was then “in her ninetieth year, and in the enjoyment of excellent health, able to wait upon herself, transact her own business and her own accounts. In many respects she is a very remarkable woman.”2

Although Patty must have been interviewed by the unidentified author (probably Emmeline B. Wells, who was then editor), diaries provided most of the substance of the Exponent sketches, since phrases such as “Mrs. Sessions in

her journal says” appear regularly. This volume is enriched by details gleaned from those articles.

The wonder of Patty’s diaries is that, despite an extremely busy and often harried life, she wrote daily, except during one period of serious illness. She clung to this habit with resourcefulness and faithfulness until circumstance, probably infirmity from old age, prevented her continuing.

Her final diary entries graphically trace a gradual decline from an energetic, productive, pioneer woman to one still determined to follow habits of a lifetime and to write about her days and doings, but with little vigor, vanishing vitality, and much aimless repetition. Her words trail into nothingness, allowing no opportunity for closure and, regrettably, giving no account of her last years and last days. People generally die of something in addition to old age—stroke, heart attack, cancer. In the case of Patty Sessions, we do not know what it was. The newspaper obituary does not say. Patty’s simple pause turned into permanent silence, but her historical contributions had already been fixed.

Her foremost legacy came through her role as a midwife. Midwifery was an important profession in Maine, where Patty Bartlett was born on 4 February 1795 to Enoch Bartlett and (Martha) Anna Hall. The country was sparsely settled, doctors scarce, and families large, if that of Enoch Bartlett provides a prototype. His first wife, Eliza Seager, bore ten children before she died when her youngest child was nine years old. Four years later, Patty became the firstborn of Enoch’s second wife, Anna, who bore nine children and lived a few months past her one hundredth birthday.

When Patty’s father brought her mother home, the country was so new that “they rode forty miles on horseback by a spotted line,” where trees were blazed to mark the trail, and “then forty more where there was only a track, and took all she had on the same horse.”

Enoch and Anna Bartlett lie in a rural graveyard, visible from the front doorstep of a still-occupied house built by Enoch in the early 1790s to accommodate his large and growing family. A wooded hillside slopes down to the Sunday River Road, which skirts the cemetery. Today, from Bethel, Maine, Route 2, a meandering country road, follows the river north to a weathered covered bridge of 1872 vintage. Across today’s more modern bridge, a dirt road turns right and up a hill to the large, two-story, colonial house where Patty was born and lived until she married.

The military service of one of Patty’s ancestors—probably Joseph Bartlett of Middlesex, Massachusetts—during the 1690 Canadian campaign of the French and Indian Wars made her father, Enoch, a landholder; instead of wages, Massachusetts offered its soldiers or their survivors land grants. In

1737 descendants of the servicemen of Sudbury, Massachusetts, and adjacent towns who had participated in the 1690 campaign petitioned the legislature for a township, which was not then awarded. Perhaps the conditions were too stringent. A certain number of settlers were required, as well as a house of public worship and an ordained minister.⁴

On 23 May 1768 Enoch’s father, Ebenezer Bartlett, signed a new petition. In June a township known as Sudbury-Canada was granted on both sides of the Androscoggin River. Part of this original grant was incorporated as Bethel in 1796, and a township called Bostwick was then organized. In 1805 Bostwick citizens petitioned for incorporation under the name of Newry; the petition was granted. According to the 1790 census, 324 persons populated Sudbury-Canada Township, 60 of them heads of families, including Enoch Bartlett. In 1800, when Patty was five years old, the census showed Enoch Bartlett in Bostwick, also known as the Sunday River Plantation, where there were 12 heads of families and a total population of 102. So with some truthfulness, Patty could claim that she was born in Sudbury-Canada, in Bostwick, on the Sunday River Plantation, in Bethel, or in Newry, but she chose Bethel. Maps of 1858 locate the Enoch Bartlett home in Newry.

Whatever the name of the community where Patty spent her childhood, its primitive and harsh environment shaped her work ethic. Rearing a large family in such a new settlement required the labors of the whole family.

They cut and fitted their firewood. . . . They raised sheep, sheared them, spun the wool, wove the cloth and made their garments. . . . They saved their tallow and dipped their candles. . . . They obtained their food from the soil and the forest. . . . They welcomed the traveler at their door because he broke the monotony and bore “news” that was months old. . . . They made their own music, travelling miles to gather around a hearth, for an evening’s sing . . . . When the evening meal was finished the pioneers did something besides toast their feet on the hearth. The family circle was seldom idle. The women were busy spinning, weaving, sewing, knitting, candle dipping, soft soap mixing, while the men fashioned shoes, ax-handles, ox yokes, brooms, baskets, wooden bowls, spoons and such.⁵

Patty fit the pattern. Years later on 24 June 1863 in Salt Lake City, Patty recorded, “got my web [woven fabric] out for blanket & undergarments 28 yds I do feel thankful to my heavenly Father that he gives me health and strenth and a disposition to work and make cloth and other things for my comfort

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The house of Enoch and Anna Hall Bartlett, Newry, Maine, where Patty Bartlett was born in 1795. Courtesy of Irene S. Poulson.

A sampler Patty Bartlett began in Maine and finished in the Salt Lake Valley in 1848. Sampler courtesy of Delilah Brown; photograph by J M Heslop.
now in the sixty ninth year of my age. And I also feel thankful that I had a mother that put me to work when I was young and learned me how."

She learned more than domestic skills. Her diaries, including her copious financial records, testify to Patty's business acumen. She was more comfortable as an economic producer—even at times being an all-too-necessary means of support for her husbands and their polygamous wives—than a consumer. She was tightfisted, allowing no one, including family members, to bilk her out of hard-earned money; but she was also often magnanimous in supporting causes in which she believed.

She did not learn her financial or medical skills or her production abilities in a formal school setting. Particularly for females, schooling was limited—even seen as unnecessary—in her day. Patty did recall being carried in the arms of the schoolmistress into her father's shop when it was used for a classroom. There she was taught to read and write—skills that served her well but that neither of her parents acquired. 6

At the age of seventeen, she married David Sessions, despite strong parental objections. The young couple moved ten miles away to his parents' home in Ketcham. With David's rheumatic mother needing constant care, Patty found herself in charge of the household. Here she stumbled into midwifery, quite by accident.

One day a young woman was taken suddenly ill, and sent for Mother Sessions [Patty's mother-in-law, Rachel Stevens/Stavens, b. 1767], who was in the habit of attending obstetrical cases in the vicinity; she was very feeble and had to be led, and before she had time to go any distance, another messenger came telling the young Mrs. Sessions to run as quickly as she could. She hurried on with all speed and when she arrived it was thought the young woman was dying; Mrs. Sessions, who was entirely unskilled in affairs of this kind, but had abundant nerve force and moral courage, took the child and put the mother in bed before Mother Sessions arrived. . . . A short time afterwards the doctor and some other help came, but all was over. The doctor examined the mother and child to see that all was right, and finding everything in a good condition, he was anxious to see the young and inexperienced woman who had so skilfully performed the work. The doctor called upon her and congratulated her upon her ability, and told her she must attend to that business, not to have any fear, for she would prosper in it, as it was a new country and there were many about to move in, it would be necessary to have more help of this kind. About four months after she attended another young woman in her confinement, and from that

time she has followed the profession of a midwife until within a very recent date, when she felt that at her age she was no longer to be depended upon.7

It may have been Dr. Timothy Carter, the first permanent physician in Bethel, who encouraged Patty to practice midwifery. He came to Bethel in 1799 and for fourteen years was the sole practitioner, making fifty-mile rounds on horseback along the Androscoggin River. Three predecessors, Dr. Martin, Dr. N. T. True, and Dr. John Brickett, had lasted only briefly. The very earliest settlers had been ministered to by an Indian, Molly Ockett, who knew roots, barks, and herbs "from which she concocted salves, drinks, and poultices for the sick. She was often called upon as a midwife to attend women of the region at childbirth."8 Conceivably, Molly Ockett could have attended Anna Bartlett when Patty was born, and Patty may have gained some of her extensive knowledge of herbs from the area’s last resident Indian practitioner. Rachel Sessions undoubtedly also advised her daughter-in-law, as did the doctor who first urged Patty to take up midwifery.

Her skill in delivering babies would become critical to the well-being of fellow members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which she joined in 1834. As a Mormon, Patty received stronger confirmation of her decision to follow an obstetrical career. In an obituary Phebe Carter Foss Sessions, wife of Patty’s son David, remembered that "While at Nauvoo she [Patty] was set apart by Brigham Young [who became Mormon Church president in 1847] and Heber C. Kimball [who became a counselor to Brigham Young] as a doctor for women. Leaving Nauvoo she went to Winter Quarters where she was very efficient in waiting upon the sick, especially the women."9

Of course, neither Nauvoo, Illinois, nor Winter Quarters, Iowa, existed when Patty was midwifing in Maine. Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball were only eleven or twelve years old when Patty and David were married. More about them later. Nevertheless, as Patty’s life unfolded, she learned to value and celebrate spiritual reinforcement from church leaders and from women who belonged to her church. Beginning in 1846, when the saints were driven from Nauvoo and trekked across Iowa to what became their Winter Quarters and later crossed the plains to what became Utah, Patty wrote often in her diaries about an elite circle of women of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This select group met regularly to bless and be blessed, to

7. Ibid.
testify in tongues, to heal and be healed. Patty was a central figure among them and obviously appreciated her prestige. Among others the group included many of Brigham Young’s wives, such as Eliza R. Snow, and a number of the wives of Heber C. Kimball. On 26 September 1847, two days after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, Patty rejoiced that she put Lorenzo Young’s wife Harriet to bed with a son “the first male born in this valley it was said to me more than 5 months ago that my hands should be the first to handle the first born son in the place of rest for the saints even in the city of our God I have come more than one thousand miles to do it since it was spoken.” The prophesy had been pronounced in a meeting with her “sisters” in Winter Quarters before the 1847 trek to the Great Basin.

Church founder Joseph Smith himself had approved of women’s increasing spiritual powers. In early remarks to the Relief Society, he had instructed them that “... foolish things were circulating ... against some sisters not doing right in laying hands on the sick. Said that if the people had common sympathies they would rejoice that the sick could be healed ... these signs, such as healing the sick, casting out devils, etc., should follow all that believe, whether male or female.”

Patty’s belief in and dedication to the spiritual gifts and powers of women motivated her to encourage young girls, including her granddaughter Martha Ann, to learn to speak in tongues and share other manifestations of the spirit. Her journal describes meetings with them, her instruction, and their shy efforts to partake of such spiritual fare.

Patty didn’t depend alone on being set apart by her church leaders for midwifery or gaining practical knowledge. She studied. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Museum of History and Art owns a rare 1840 book with the impressive title *Aristotle’s Works: Containing the Master-piece, Direction for Midwives, and Counsel and Advice to Child-Bearing Women*. This book overflows with 320 pages of information and color illustrations of the fetus in various positions and stages of development. It was donated by a descendant who verifies that it belonged to Patty Bartlett Sessions, midwife, who has been credited with escorting 3,997 babies into the world.

Whether or not the number is accurate (her extant diaries do not support that many), Patty recorded hundreds of deliveries, identifying one or both parents, the sex of the child, and the date and time of birth. She also recorded her prices and duly noted payments. She could be bone weary or in


Title page, table of contents, and two illustrations from Aristotle's Works, an instructional manual for midwives that was owned by Patty Sessions. Courtesy of LDS Church Museum of History and Art.
a low mood but still be depended upon to answer a request for medical attention—and later to write about it in her diary. The accumulating facts become indisputable.

Dependability is a by-product of necessity. As newlyweds, David and Patty used ingenuity and toil to get ahead. By the spring following their marriage, David had earned a cow and some cotton by working on his parents’ farm. Patty had made butter, sold it, and bought a pail in which to milk. She spun the cotton and made a bed tick and sheets. She picked cattails and filled the tick so the couple might at least have their own bed. And before their first anniversary, David procured land and built a log house in nearby Ketcham.

“In the Spring we moved into our own house,” Mrs. Sessions in her journal says. “An old acquaintance of mine told me she was going back to where she came from and wanted me to buy her loom for four dollars. Mr. Sessions earned the money and purchased the loom, and I soon had all the weaving I could do fetched to me from ten to twelve miles.” Mrs. Sessions earned quite a reputation as a weaver both for good work and promptitude; her work was always ready for her patrons at the time specified.12

When opportunity arose for Patty, she not only grasped but expanded it. From her weaving skills, she created a lasting home industry, one that provided a lifelong means of income and self-fulfillment. She kept at handwork of one kind or another until she left off writing her narration, augmenting weaving with sewing, knitting, braiding straw, and making rags into rugs for herself and others. She persisted in knitting socks to the very end. Family tradition tells of so many dropped stitches and other errors in the stockings she made in her declining years that they were unraveled each evening (without her knowledge, of course) and the yarn given back to her for the next day’s session with the knitting needles. Throughout her years she taught her skills to family members, neighbors, and friends.

She was a gardener with extraordinary tenacity and ability. She sowed and planted and watered and weeded and reaped her vegetables and fruit, which she dried and sold, selling seeds and starts as well. She generally paid her tithing, the ten percent donation required from worthy Mormon church members, in fruit. Overpayments she collected back in money. She was an industrious member of her community’s workforce, harder working, more productive, and more successful than many of her male contemporaries. Although she was doggedly independent, others were often dependent upon her for assistance with money, produce, or employment as laborers. For her

A pioneer loom much like those Patty Sessions used. Loom on display at the Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum; photograph courtesy of LDS Church Museum of History and Art.
times she was certainly a liberated woman, who, out of training, habit, and circumstances, increasingly valued economic self-sufficiency.

The will to be self-sustaining must have developed early in her marriage, as undoubtedly the progress the newlyweds experienced in Ketcham (a town marked today only by crumbling foundations) was as much a product of Patty’s industry as of David's. But the land was hilly and rocky, and they decided they could farm more successfully elsewhere. They took their new son, Perrigrine (born 15 June 1814), and moved northeast about nine miles to Andover West Surplus on Bear River, which would be annexed to Newry in 1837.

... the conveniences were not very great, for Mrs. Sessions in her journal says, “we moved into an old cabin where they had made salt, and lived there until we built a new house which we moved into in the night, lest the old, rickety cabin should fall down upon us. . . . As soon as my husband’s father learned that we had moved into a new house he came and wanted us to take them (his wife and himself) to live with us. The old lady was not able to stand on her feet, but had to be moved in a chair on wheels; she remained with us while she lived, four or five years; during all that time never straightened nor turned herself in bed once. She was a very large, heavy woman, and I had to lift and move her around or wheel her from room to room. One day I was moving her and my arm slipped from the chair and caught my elbow between the slats, which pulled the elbow cap out of place. The pain was very great, but when mother Sessions asked if she had hurt me, I said I guessed not; with help I seated the old lady and then went into my front room where I had a girl sewing for me, told her to take hold of my hand and hold it still, and let me pull back and straighten my arm; she did so and I pushed it into place, and put my arm in a sling, in which I had to keep it for some weeks. When father came home he wished to know what ailed my arm, I told him rheumatism or something else.”

Courage and willpower helped her handle many of her trials and challenges.

David and Patty had bought two hundred acres of land, on which, according to Perrigrine, “my Father lived untill 1837 . . . and built a large house and two large barnes with severil sheds bought more land joining and a sawmill and built a grist mill and had a large farm of four hundred Acres of land all in one piece.” And Patty continued her practice of midwifery

14. Perrigrine Sessions, “Diaries,” 3 February to 19 March 1886, pp. B-4, 5 (hereafter cited as DPG), holograph, Archives of the Historical Department, Church
regularly, day or night, rain or shine, sometimes going twenty miles on horseback in the night over those lonely roads.”

During the ensuing years, their worldly good fortune continued, and the number of children increased to seven. But they were beset by tribulation, as Perrigrine’s diary describes:

May the ninth, 1823 my brother David jun was born and the sixteenth of September following my Sister Anna was taken with the colery morbus and died the twentieth being three years and six months old at her death and the twenty-second my GrandMother [Rachel] was taken with the same complaint and died Oct 1 and September 23 1824 my Grand Father [David Sessions, b. 1749] being as well as common at his dinner and went to a neighbours hou[se] set down on a chair and died instantly did not know as any thing ailed him untill he could not speak . . . March the 16 1825 my Sister Anna B the second was born and the first day of September 1825 my Grand Father Enoch Bartlett died with a fever August the first 1827 my brother Bartlett was born and February the 15–1828 he died being six months and fifteen days died with the hooping cough and in 1832 were all sick with the typhus fever and my sister Anna died August tenth aged seven years and four months and twenty four days at this time my Mother could not raise her hand to her head and lay in the same room where my sister died my Father and brother Sylvanus lay in an other room and did not see her after she was taken sick My Aunt Apphia and her daughter lay in an other room they were all helpless I had had the fever and had got so that I could set up some my brother David was just coming down with the fever and my Sister Sylvia being the second time deprived of her only sister she morned and wept untill she had to go to bed at this time my feelings I could not descibe . . . September 15 my brother Sylvanus died being sixteen years and three months and twelve days old . . . at this time my Father and Mother had got some better but my Grandmother Bartlett was there and she and David were so sick that they did not know when Sylvanus died altho they were in the same room. After my Grandmother got better she was carried home on a bed six miles betwene two horses . . . there was Eleven that had the fever at my Fathers that summer and many others in the neighbourhhood.

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of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; photocopy of holograph in possession of Donna T. Smart, courtesy of Irene Sessions Poulson.

So David and Patty buried four of their eight children in Maine: Sylvanus (3 June 1816–15 September 1832); Anna B. (21 March 1820–20 September 1823); Anna B., the second (16 March 1825–10 August 1832); and Bartlett (1 August 1827–15 February 1828). Where these Sessions children are buried is not known for certain, although as early as 4 April 1814, two committees had been chosen to lay out a burying place, obtain the land, and fence it; and on 1 April 1816 the deeds for Bear River and Sunday River cemeteries were recorded. That location would be the most likely. Surviving such dreadful circumstances and childhood diseases were Perrigrine (15 June 1814–3 June 1893), the firstborn; Sylvia (31 July 1818–13 April 1882), the first daughter; and David, Jr. (9 May 1823–19 April 1896). Amanda, who was born later on 14 November 1837 in Far West, Missouri, died on 15 May 1841 in Nauvoo, Illinois.

In August 1833 occurred an event of such significance for the David Sessions family that it cancelled any prospects of their living and dying near their birthplace, as their parents had, and of being buried next to those already planted in the ground.

The Americas had been settled by immigrants who had left their native roots and the graves of their dead to seek a place to worship in their own fashion. Their quest continues to this day, but the first half of the nineteenth century spawned a particularly significant number of seekers after religious freedom and community, including such well-known figures as Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Albert Brisbane, George Ripley—and Joseph Smith (born 1805).

According to his own account, when he was fifteen years old, Smith felt, as he described it, “confused” by the religious frenzy in New England. His family had accepted the Presbyterian faith, but the youthful Joseph felt inclined toward Methodism. However, he could not reach “any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.” Joseph felt a prompting when he read the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.” The boy retired to a grove near the Smith farm in upstate New York (now known by Mormons as the Sacred Grove) and prayed for enlightenment on which church was right. He reported that he saw a vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ, during which he was told that all churches were wrong. On a single night in 1823, a personage appeared three times at Joseph’s bedside and taught him from the scriptures and about other religious matters, particularly emphasizing the location of ancient records that were buried near Palmyra, New York, in the Hill Cumorah. The angel, called Moroni, had been the last keeper of the records that he later showed to Joseph Smith with the caution that he must wait to obtain and transcribe the plates.

Joseph had to mature through such tutorial visitations for four years. Finally, the plates were delivered to him, and, after overcoming considerable
Sylvia Sessions Lyon (Clark). Courtesy of Ardell Backman.

Perrigrine Sessions. Courtesy of Irene S. Poulson.

David Sessions, Jr. Courtesy of International Society, Daughters of Utah Pioneers.
obstacles and persecution, he began the transcription on 5 April 1829. The result was the Book of Mormon, the translation of which took about sixty working days. The Book of Mormon chronicles the immigration of three separate bands of people to the Americas, predating the birth of Jesus Christ.

According to Joseph, it was because of the contents of this book and heavenly instruction that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was born on 6 April 1830. To Joseph Smith and his followers, this new church was a restoration of the one established by Jesus Christ before his crucifixion. Priesthood authority as it had existed in the primitive church was also restored. As Jesus had instructed his apostles to go into all the world and preach the gospel, so also the Mormons, as they came to be known, sent missionaries forth almost immediately.17

In August of 1833 Mormon missionaries came preaching in Andover West Surplus. Their message altered the Sessions family's lives dramatically and permanently since they had been prepared for the new religion by Patty's spiritual yearnings. According to Perrigrine, their neighbors were all Methodists, and "... my Mother by reading the Bible began to think that baptism was necessary and October the first 1816 she was baptized [as a Methodist] my Father made no pretentions to religion as yet but did not appose her ... [later] my Father made a profession of Methodism and in january he was baptised by immersion in 1820."18

Patty at once accepted the message of the Mormon missionaries, but her husband needed to study longer. To appease him, she waited until July 1834, when, with David's consent, she was baptized and confirmed a member by missionary Daniel Bean. Perrigrine wrote

she stood firm steming all oposition and she received much of it from her neighbours and some of her brothers & sisters she remained alone in the Church almost one year before any of the rest of us joined the church & six miles from any other member. I will here say that we had severil visits from the Twelve [Apostles, of the governing body of the Mormon Church] and other traviling Elders which gave us much joy the Twelve held a conference to my Fathers on the 12 of August, 1835. Brigham Yongs and Lymon Johnson two of the Twelve were present and the blessing of God atendid the meating ... here the gathering of the saints was taught and preparations began to be made to remove to Zion this looked like a great sacrifise to make as the distance was so far but we began to dispose of property as my Father and I had considerable—

17. For more complete information as given by Joseph Smith, see his History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976).
times were hard and money scarce but after a continual perseverance [sic] we all started. . . . we took leave of our neighbours and friends on the fifth of June 1837—when many a tear was shed.\(^{19}\)

As Perrigrine implied, one of the principles that the fledgling church taught was the gathering of Israel and its adoptees. From the earliest days of church history, the people of upper New York and its environs openly showed apprehension and suspicion toward the newly founded religion. Members began to search for a safe place to practice their religion freely, and Kirtland, Ohio, became an early location for Mormons. In fact, their first temple, dedicated on 27 March 1836, is still an impressive edifice in Kirtland but now belongs to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a splinter group that declined to follow the leadership of Brigham Young. But in Kirtland financial woes plagued Joseph Smith and other church leaders, and at the time the Sessions family departed from Maine, fledgling Mormons were turning toward a new Zion in Far West, Missouri. After an arduous journey, Patty and David’s family arrived there in November 1837, having traveled by land and water, by self-made trail, and by well-used road. They had been delayed in Kirtland, Ohio, for seven weeks while family members suffered through the measles. It was in Kirtland that they saw their prophet for the first time, when they heard Joseph Smith speak in the Kirtland Temple. Meeting the prophet must have strengthened their resolve, a boost they needed, because the last part of the journey would be particularly difficult for Patty, who gave birth on 14 November 1837 to a daughter, Amanda, shortly after reaching Far West.

With customary diligence, the Sessions family wasted no time getting established once they had reached Missouri. They bought property in Far West, including two block houses and five acres of fenced land. During the winter they fenced one hundred more acres.

Details of their days in Missouri are sketchy as only fragmentary quotations from Patty’s earliest diary exist. The *Exponent* mentions more than a few visits from and to Joseph Smith, one occurring when he married Patty’s daughter Sylvia to Windsor P. Lyon.

During all this time we find Sister Sessions performing daily household duties and attending obstetrical cases regularly. Very frequently one sees in her diary entries like this: “Rode twelve miles last night, put Sister _____ to bed, fine boy, etc.—rode six miles and put Sister _____ to bed with a pair of twins, difficult case, severe labor, but the Lord blessed us and we got through all right, patient safe, etc.”\(^{20}\)

\(^{19}\) Ibid., pp. B-9, 10.

\(^{20}\) “Patty Sessions,” *Woman’s Exponent* 13 (1 November): 86.
In spring 1838 the Sessions men planted corn, potatoes, and grain on forty acres, after which Perrigrine left for Maine to collect debts. While he was gone, armed and angry Missourians, perhaps fearing being overrun by these strange, religious “fanatics,” turned to violence to force the growing Mormon colony from their state. At his return Perrigrine found that “twenty or twenty five of the Saints had been murtered and fifty or sixty in Prison among whome was the Prophet and his brother Hirum with chaines on in a cold wet Dunjeon with horse beef to eat . . . the Prison being garded by those that swore they should never come out and the whole Church under the exterminating order of Libern W. Boggs Governor of the State.” Boggs had ordered that “the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary for the public peace—their outrages are beyond all description.” Perrigrine described the mob’s killing cattle, hogs, and sheep and stealing horses. And he reported the relief and joy all the Sessions family felt when a letter from the Prophet Joseph instructed them to head for Illinois.

Again they were on the move. From 15 February 1839 until early in April, through mud and cold and ice-clogged rivers, the Sessions family struggled toward Illinois. They occasionally found lodging but usually had no shelter but a tent. On 26 February Patty recorded, “still muddy, and we have to tent out, cold, wet and inclement, no shelter but a tent, a sick babe and no comforts. Trust in God and pray for courage and endurance.” Perrigrine’s wife Julia and Patty were both ill with what Patty called ague (probably malaria) during the journey, and Patty carried the ailing eighteen-month-old Amanda in her arms the whole distance. A temporary house of their own in Carthage, Illinois, must have seemed like the promised land. Perrigrine recorded

About the first of May . . . brother Joseph the Prophet got liberated from prison and met with the saints in Qincy [sic] in conference This gave us much joy to see his face among the Saints and here the voice of inspiration that floed from his lips this caused our drooping spirits to revive as we were like sheep with out a shepherd that had been scatered in a cloudy and dark day here a commity was apointed to search out a location where the Saints could gather togerther to and the place caled Nauvoo now was the place

23. DPG, 3 February 1845, pp. B-14, 15, 16.
On 27 June 1839 Perrigrine left for a mission to Maine, from which he would not return until 2 June 1840. In the meantime, a month earlier the family had moved from Carthage to Nauvoo, and Mr. Sessions, as Patty always called David, began—once again—to build a house, which was completed the following September.

*The Woman’s Exponent* is silent on events during that first winter in Nauvoo. Since one account reports that the Sessions family lost twelve hundred dollars in land and four hundred dollars in livestock and corn when they were driven from Missouri, survival must have been their major worry. Not all of them did survive; Amanda, at the age of three years, six months, and one day, died on 15 May 1841 of croup. She was buried in Nauvoo.

In 1842 Patty participated in a Mormon ceremony that was of overwhelming importance to her. She wrote about it in her later diary: “I was sealed to Joseph Smith by Willard Richards March 9 1842 in Newel K Whitneys chamber Nauvoo for time and all eternity. . . . Sylvia my daughter was presant when I was sealed to Joseph Smith.”

One of the major doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints centers around the eternity of family relationships. How this belief translated into practice in the early years is difficult to explain. Todd Compton notes

Because of the complexity of Mormon marriage practice and experimentation, there is a great deal of ambiguity concerning what constituted marriage in early Mormonism, and Mormon theological terms for marriage and plural marriage can be confusing. I define as marriage any relationship solemnized by a marriage ceremony of some sort. “Sealing” as used in early Mormonism is a complex term that deserves extensive study, but as it developed in Nauvoo Mormonism, it often meant the linking of man and woman for eternity as well as for time, i.e., eternal marriage. . . . when a man and a woman (not siblings or parent-child) were “sealed,” the sealing was always a marriage.27

To Mormons many of the sealings could be termed “spiritual marriages.” There were non-marital sealings as well, through which members were “adopted” into the eternal families of other, usually leading Mormons. Both of these were religious rituals intended to assure one a place in eternity. Sealings were also performed to guarantee single or widowed women temporal support. Still


others were marriages meant to be consummated here and endure hereafter. Some sealed marriages were polygamous, and some in the early years of the church involved polyandry as well as polygyny. Then and now, one holding priesthood authority must perform the sealing ordinance for worthy recipients for it to be valid.

How Patty regarded her sealing to Joseph Smith is problematic. But being sealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith was so important to Patty that some years later, on 3 July 1867, she personally saw to it that the ordinance was further validated. Joseph F. Smith stood in for his uncle.

The Woodruff Manifesto of 1890 ostensibly put an end to polygamous sealings, and the practice of sealings to church authorities changed in 1894, when Mormon president Wilford Woodruff presented a revelation stating that children should be sealed "to their parents and they to their parents as far back as the records can be obtained." Until Woodruff's pronouncement, as Patty's diary confirms, it was common for individuals to be sealed to revered church leaders. Since Woodruff's revelation, however, emphasis, focus, and practice have centered on church members completing accurate genealogical research and performing temple ordinances by proxy for their deceased ancestors. Of course, Patty's copious genealogical records (omitted from this volume) indicate that she began to fulfill that responsibility even before Woodruff's dictate, as soon as the Logan Temple was completed and dedicated in 1884.

Sylvia Sessions was also sealed to Joseph Smith. She confided to her daughter, Josephine, that the ceremony had taken place at about the same time as Zina D. Huntington and Eliza R. Snow were sealed to the prophet as plural wives. According to Fawn M. Brodie in *No Man Knows My History*, Zina Huntington was sealed to Joseph on 27 October 1841 and Eliza R. Snow on 29 June 1842. If, as Brodie implies, the Nauvoo Temple records of sealings were available for research when she wrote her biography of Joseph Smith, they lacked information about Sylvia since Brodie left question marks following both her age and the date of her sealing to the prophet. The life summaries Brodie wrote for Sylvia and Patty are both flawed, so her research appears to be suspect. At present Nauvoo Temple endowment dates are available, but sealing dates for Joseph Smith are not in the Nauvoo Temple records for 1845 and 1846. A personal history of Sylvia written by one of her descendants


30. "Nauvoo Temple Endowment Register," 10 December 1845 to 8 February 1846 (Salt Lake City: Temple Index Bureau, 1974). Sealings did not begin in the temple until 1845.
reports that Sylvia was sealed to Joseph Smith 26 January 1846, long after the martyrdom. Heber C. Kimball stood as proxy. This is the date she reportedly also married Kimball for time.\(^{31}\)

It seems uncharacteristic of Patty not to mention Sylvia’s sealing to Joseph Smith, particularly since some studies indicate that Sylvia’s daughter, Josephine Rosetta Lyon, was Joseph Smith’s child. Danel W. Bachman quotes from a 24 February 1915 affidavit sworn by Josephine Lyon Fisher in the presence of Andrew Jenson, Joseph H. Grant, and her son, Irvin Frederich Fisher. Josephine states that her mother Sylvia on her deathbed “told me that I was the daughter of the Prophet Smith, she having been sealed to the Prophet at the time that her husband Mr Lyon was out of fellowship with the Church.”\(^{32}\)

According to family tradition, Windsor P. Lyon was excommunicated for suing Thomas B. Marsh for an unpaid loan. This was in 1842, according to church records. Lyon was rebaptized in his own kitchen in Nauvoo on 1 February 1846 by Heber C. Kimball and received his endowment (personal sacred ordinance) in the Nauvoo Temple on 3 February. Plans for the flight from Nauvoo were well along at this time. Family tradition also records that during the administration of Wilford Woodruff, Sylvia had the sealing to Joseph Smith canceled and was sealed to Windsor P. Lyon. There is no evidence that Heber C. Kimball and Sylvia had a marital relationship either before or after she came west.

Despite the strange fact that Patty wrote nothing linking Sylvia with Joseph Smith, evidently she also believed that Josephine was the prophet’s daughter. In 1905 Angus M. Cannon met with Joseph Smith III (1832-1914), son of the martyred prophet and president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the splinter group that claimed authority through Joseph Smith’s posterity. Steadfastly, the Reorganized Church had maintained that there was no practice of polygamy during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. As Cannon tried to convince him, the younger Smith asked why there were no children to prove it. Cannon responded, “I will now refer you to one case where it was said by the girl’s grandmother that your father has a daughter born of a plural wife. The girl’s grandmother was Mother Sessions, who lived in Nauvoo and died here in the valley. . . . Aunt Patty Sessions asserts that the girl was born within the time after your father was said to have taken the mother.”\(^{33}\)

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32. Danel W. Bachman, “Plural Marriage before the Death of Joseph Smith” (master’s thesis, Purdue University, 1975), 141.

33. Angus M. Cannon, “Interview with Joseph Smith III,” pp. 25–26, 1905, typescript, Archives of the Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
Josephine Rosetta Lyon was born on 8 February 1844. Patty was indeed very circumspect in what she revealed.

Although Patty's husband, David, would have been in Nauvoo when her own sealing to Joseph Smith took place, his reaction is an imponderable. But on 11 June 1842 he started for Maine with a "Bro. Pack." Patty regretted his leaving: "He left me alone, and I am very lonesome." During her husband's absence, Patty apparently concentrated even more diligently on her profession as midwife. She also recorded in her diaries, as always, the names of familiar church figures with whom she associated, such as Joseph Smith, Willard Richards, and Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack, or "Mother Smith."

On 24 July 1842 she "went to the Relief Society and signed a petition to send to the governor of the state." The Exponent writer continued with the information, "This was the first petition of the Relief Society, and it was then quite an event in the history of women." The petition was sent in tandem with one from the Nauvoo city council. Both requested the Illinois governor, Thomas Carlin, to protect Joseph Smith at a time when Missouri officials were seeking his extradition. The Relief Society petition purportedly contained about one thousand signatures.

The years between 1840 and 1846 stayed busy and productive for Patty as she moved among the sick and treated them; she helped to lay out the dead; she officiated in her calling as a midwife. On one occasion she froze her hands and toes as she went through severe weather to attend to a sick woman. In August of 1842 she attended the birth of a stillborn baby, her first such event, she indicated, "in thirty years of midwifery."

34. "Patty Sessions," Woman's Exponent 13 (1 November): 86.
35. In those days, "Mother" seemed to be an honorific title bestowed upon older, experienced women. Patty referred to her mother-in-law as Mother Sessions. Other women, as they gained stature and years in the church, were called Mother, as was Patty herself later.
36. "Patty Sessions," Woman's Exponent 13 (1 November): 86, 94. The Relief Society was organized on 17 March 1842 by Joseph Smith for the women of the Mormon Church. Its purpose was to fulfill the "natural" inclinations of women to minister charity to those who were needy or cast down in spirit. Although its goals have expanded, it still operates in much the same way. Emma Smith, Joseph's wife, was the first president. During the exodus and early years of colonization, the formal organization was suspended although the women continued their charitable activities wherever they were. The churchwide organization was reestablished by Brigham Young in the late 1860s with Eliza R. Snow at the helm. Patty wrote a good deal about Relief Society activities in the Salt Lake Valley.
In her record keeping she specifically named the individuals whose paths crossed hers, many of them to appear in later entries. But the most poignant accounts refer to relationships with Joseph Smith, his mother, and his wife Emma. For example, between 6 August 1842 and 8 February 1844, when Sylvia gave birth to Josephine Rosetta, the Exponent biography quotes twenty-six references Patty made to the prophet or members of his family, twenty-one of them concerning "Brother Joseph." In one she said she was making shirts for Brother Joseph. In another he laid hands on her and healed her when she was sick. "From that time she speaks of Joseph having visited at her house almost daily." And "on the 12th of February she says Brother Joseph was at her house, and Mr. Lyons, Sylvia’s husband, lent him five hundred dollars." This was four days after Josephine was born.

Unfortunately, the Exponent admits that it has chosen to leave out the "trying scenes of the people in Nauvoo before and after the death of the prophet and his brother. Suffice it to say that Sister Sessions suffered with the people in sacrificing her home, etc., and also mourned much in her own breast, for she had the most profound admiration and respect for him as a Prophet of God." Patty and David received their endowments in the newly completed Nauvoo Temple in 1846.

Although Patty’s extant diaries begin in February 1846, many details leading up to the exodus must be drawn from other sources. For a multiplicity of reasons, the Mormons were forced once again to abandon their safe haven, their "City Beautiful." Nauvoo had risen from the swamps in the bend of the Mississippi River at what was then Commerce, Illinois. Converts from the United States, Canada, and Europe had poured into the city in such numbers that by 1845 the population was estimated to be fifteen thousand. To other residents of the states where they lived, Mormon doctrines were strange, their numbers were threatening, and their influence was frightening. The Nauvoo Legion, the Mormon militia with Joseph Smith at its head, was intimidating. Detractors and apostates spread rumors, particularly about polygamy. They established a new press to print the Nauvoo Expositor, a paper that denounced Smith and the church. In retaliation the Nauvoo city council authorized its destruction—an event that precipitated the arrest and assassination of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum and the eventual flight of the saints from Nauvoo.

Perrigrine’s diary casts little light on the events surrounding his parents’ departure. He helped to outfit them for the journey, which left him and his family without money or means to go themselves, and he described officiating in temple ordinances (many of the Mormons stayed behind to finish the temple, 39. Ibid., 95.
despite their abandonment of the city), as well as early attempts to burn the
temple. Then without further explanation, he attributed his being able to leave
on 20 May 1846 to “the wagon and team that the Lord had Blessed me with.”

Resettlement requires preparation and planning. Like all pioneer
women, before the trek began, Patty had to determine what to take and what
to leave and how to pack in the most orderly way. She drove a team for virtu­
ally the entire distance, an achievement in itself, but she also cooked meals.
And she never ceased to be a midwife. On 30 April 1846 she was called to
attend Adeline Benson (a false alarm) and “came home could hardly reach the
wagon. I went to bed rested me but could not eat. . . . about noon I thought
I could eat some peach pie I had a kettle of coals in the wagon I cooked my
peaches on them and by laying down and resting several times I made me a
pie went to the stove and baked it have eaten some and feel better.”

Patty did not discuss particulars about being female in the wagon train.
Cleanliness of person and belongings must have been a constant considera­
tion. At least she fretted enough about washing, sometimes recruiting help for
that chore. Almost once a month, she also mentioned ironing with what we
recognize today as awkward, heavy irons during the journey from Nauvoo to
Winter Quarters and from Winter Quarters to the Salt Lake Valley. Personal
hygiene had to be a constant challenge, not to mention the implications and
complications of exhaustion from dealing with illness and death and deliver­
ing babies day after day or night after night. Dust and insects, mud and wind,
scorching sun and pelting rain, and swollen rivers had to be confronted daily.
Still Patty wrote regularly during both reasonably good and difficult days for
the following forty-one years, a time when her continuing story and the cen­
tral focus of her life—socially and economically—reflected the growth of Salt
Lake City and the Mormon Church.

The value of the diaries of Patty Bartlett Sessions cannot be exaggerat­
ed. Patty told her tale while she was living it, shifting attention from one sce­
nario to another with little or no elaboration. She was too busy to explain
fully what she already knew, writing, as it were, only reminders for herself.
Yet she must have had some intuitive sense that her life and activities were
historically important. Occasionally she assumed a more literary tone. She
freely, fully, and dramatically discussed her ambiguous feelings as her hus­
band David took polygamous wives. Obviously she resented not being con­
sulted the way she would have liked, but she was convinced she ought to
accept the principle of plural marriage. Rosilla, David Sessions’s first plural
wife, remained behind at the time of the exodus from Nauvoo, but in June
c caught up with the company in Iowa, probably traveling with Perrigrine and
his family. On 22 June 1846 Patty wrote, “caled to sister Martha Reeves put

41. DPG, 3 February 1845, p. B-45.
her to bed with a son when I came home found Perrigrine and family and Rosilla there we was glad to see each other once more it has been 4 months & 10 days since I started and left my children if David Windsor Sylvia and her babe [Josephine] was here I feel as if I should be happy but alas they are not and sorrow fills my heart.

By July 31 she felt abandoned: “rains some fair in the afternoon I have seen many a lonesome hour this week Mr Sessions has found some fault with me and we are here alone almost, only three tents Holmans Everets and ours I do want to see the rest of our co so much that I am quite discontented. . . . August 1 I still feel very lonesome. . . . Sunday 2 Mr Sessions took Rosilla and asked me to go to the river then took her and waied across the river left me on this side was gone 2 or 3 hours got a few grapes P G [Perrigrine] and Mary [one of Perrigrine’s wives] went with them I went back to the wagons. . . .” Although such outbursts of emotional distress were infrequent, they surfaced when she could not disguise her feelings. Her journals on such occasions chart her individual inward journey as well as the outward historical record of a people.

She must have been relieved when Rosilla turned back to Illinois—without persuading David to go with her, a relief that was relatively short-lived. In the spring of 1849, David consulted Brigham and then married nineteen-year-old Harriet Teeples Wixom. He was fifty-nine, Patty was fifty-four. David died on 11 August 1850, leaving behind Harriet’s young son by an earlier marriage, Harriet pregnant, and, of course, Patty. The diaries reveal the sometimes reluctant responsibility Patty assumed for Harriet and her children.

In 1851 Patty married John Parry (1789–1868), a Welsh convert, whose wife had died as they were crossing the plains. Although she always spoke of him with respect and affection, she bemoaned the interruption of their relationship when he took a plural wife in 1854. Harriet (1822–1901), known only by the surname of Parry, bore twins, Joseph Hyrum and Bernard Llewelyn, in 1855; a daughter, Louisa Ellen, in 1857; a son, Edwin Francis, in 1860; and a son, Henry Edward, in 1862. In Wales between the years 1809 and 1824, John had fathered four sons and three daughters by his first wife. Patty delivered some of the former, and several of the latter featured prominently in her writings. Both of Patty’s husbands died at her home, where they seemed to gravitate when they were ill.

Actually Patty probably gained more from polygamy than she realized. Always of a strong nature, she became even more astute in her business dealings as she took control of her own affairs. Forced independence helped Patty to establish her success in various ventures.

For the most part, however, Patty’s writing is restrained. She seems to want to report the facts objectively. Usually she does. But sometimes her objectivity is tinged with self-justification. She wants to feel good about herself and to present her best side. She justifies her role in situations requiring
emergency medical decisions. She excuses herself for not going to Sunday meetings. She defends herself for wanting a refund on her tithing or for fees charged for her services, produce, or properties.

In order to be absolutely fair—and in her mind she was fair—Patty kept copious records of business dealings. She reported with legitimate pride that she entered the valley with one five-cent piece that she "picked up on the red Bute and since Mr Sessions died I have took care of myself and have laid up considerable." She “laid up considerable” because she worked hard as a midwife and as a consultant on other medical matters; she toiled at cultivating her gardens and orchards and in selling and preserving their fruits; and she wisely invested in other properties, saving what she made in all her endeavors. She bought stock in Zions Cooperative Mercantile Association, and by 1883 owned shares worth sixteen thousand dollars. She was as compulsive about her financial accounting as about recording her daily activities. Thus her financial ledgers become veritable repositories of information about the pioneer economy. She recorded the costs of delivering babies, of purchases she and others made at the cooperative store she operated for a while, and of items she acquired for her home; the charges for properties she purchased, the rent received from them, and construction expenses; and the value of in-kind payments for tithing. She never made a loan without noting it and crossing it out when paid. She made a record of all her business dealings with her family, including her two husbands. Patty Sessions was a formidable business woman, often seeming just plain miserly. She was not miserly, but she was frugal. She worked hard for what she accumulated. She took care of her belongings and her property. She expected the same of others and a fair accounting—such as she offered—for business dealings. Although her system is sometimes hard to decipher, it is fascinating in its content and comprehensiveness (only small samples could be included here).

Many of Patty’s transactions evolved out of her social contacts. As mentioned earlier, she was a charter member of a group of women sealed to Joseph Smith during his lifetime, and this close-knit group supported each other materially and spiritually. Since life often revolves around births and illness, Patty was a central figure in an extremely high percentage of the growing number of households in the community of Salt Lake City and later Bountiful, as she had been in Nauvoo, in Winter Quarters, and in the wagons of the pioneer parties of 1847. Obviously she was respected enough to be trusted in emergencies and to be in demand for parties and important social occasions. On 23 December 1881 an anniversary celebration of the birth of Joseph Smith was held in Salt Lake City. Patty sat at the table with President John Taylor, Apostle and later President Wilford Woodruff, Apostle and later

42. From the first page of the final of Patty’s diaries included in this publication.
John Parry, who married Patty Sessions in 1852 and was the first leader of the choir that became the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. From J. Spencer Cornwall, *A Century of Singing: The Salt Lake Mormon Tabernacle Choir* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1958), 348.

The Patty Sessions Academy, which she built in 1884 for her grandchildren and other Bountiful children. Patty is on the left wearing a black bonnet and holding a child. Her son Perrigrine, in vest and hat, stands in front of the doorway with four of his wives to his left. Courtesy of Kim Burningham.
President Joseph F. Smith, Patriarch John Smith, and many other illustrious citizens of the area. As she was important to others, they were also important to her. Names of friends and associates take up a substantial amount of the paper to which she applied her pen.

She was influential within the spiritual economy of the community, especially for the women, but in some ways for the men, too. Though the spiritual occasions when the sisters met to strengthen each other took on a celebratory air, there was no hint of usurping or infringing on male priesthood authority. The women merely exercised the spiritual gifts and powers to which they knew they were entitled. Without a doubt their gatherings strengthened all to face the hardships and obstacles of their forced settlement of a strange land. The men also recognized, approved of, sometimes participated in, and encouraged the women’s activities. Patty wrote on 22 November 1847, in the evening prayed for Heber [Kimball] with Elen and Mary Elen [Kimball’s wives] I anointed Elen acording to Hebers request when he met me on the road."

Since Patty was vitally interested in education, her diaries provide information about that aspect of early life in the Salt Lake Valley. She herself took advantage of whatever learning experiences arose. She availed herself of public lectures, was a participating member and leader of the Council of Health established by Willard Richards, and studied the Deseret Alphabet (the Mormon attempt to invent a universal language). Among some loose papers, a small scrap contains a list of dates and two words, “Dancing school.” She enjoyed that dancing school and bragged that she could dance with her grandchildren and have fun. She recognized the worth of schools and teachers and even paid to build a school in Bountiful, the Patty Sessions Academy, for her grandchildren and the children of those who could not afford the cost of education. Phebe Sessions wrote, “She left money enough in the Parent Co-op so that the dividend will run the school continuously ten months in the year and pay all the expenses pertaining to it.”

Her public spiritedness embraced more than education. She gladly donated to the Perpetual Emigration Fund, established to support the migration west of poorer Mormons. As president of the Indian Relief Society, she was a key contributor to the Mormon efforts to clothe the Indians. She made rugs for the Salt Lake Tabernacle, collected donations for the poor from members of the Relief Society, and donated generously to the building of temples.

She took in boarders for pay and hosted various visitors for nothing, sometimes doggedly, other times willingly. One overnight “guest” did not pay her any money, she said, but left enough bedbugs to make her wish they were coins. When she wrote those lines, she did not mean to be funny. Her
observations always seem deadly serious. So her small snatches of humor—of which she appears to be completely oblivious—elicit unexpected chuckles. On 6 December 1851 she wrote, “I have cut all my wood since Monday.” Then, on December 14, after she had married John Parry, she noted, “I was married to John Parry and I feel to thank the Lord that I have some one to cut my wood for me.” She was unconsciously very funny sometimes.

Her photograph shows just how serious she was. She called it a “likeness,” so what is it like? Most apparent are the chiseled and determined jawline, the wide, unflinching eyes that stare into the camera without a hint of a smile, the prominent nose. Her face is framed by one of the caps she sewed from time to time; her slender hands that worked at so many tasks hold her needles and something she is knitting. She wears a dress of dark brocade, with a long, pointed collar and a round, hand-crocheted one. Of course, people who sat for photographs in those days had to remain absolutely still, but her stern character is still permanently etched. Patty’s photograph shows one view only, however, whereas her writings leave a trail of information, beckoning the reader to explore all kinds of inexhaustible byways and hidden paths.

Patty, as time passed by, as she became deaf, as the population grew and her faculties diminished, withdrew more and more into the bosom of family and very close associates. She still wanted to maintain the work ethic accumulated over decades, but her faculties began to fail, which diminished the accomplishments that she had recounted in all those earlier diaries. Her writing eventually slows to a plod, gives little information, and even seems boring in its habitual repetitions.

But such a statement reflects a shortsighted value judgment. To be obsessed with deciphering all the intricacies of her diaries; to witness the gradual aging and decline of a great pioneer woman; to see her entries fade into words such as “the same” and later a mere recital of dates; to read “it is now Friday the 4th” and then find the rest of the page—and all other pages—blank is to feel a sense of profound loss, but also to understand a fraction more about the fleeting nature of human experience and to develop respect for the enduring value of personal records.

Further, to read the diaries of Patty Sessions is to gain an exceptional insight into one human psyche and the dynamics of early Mormon women and to participate vicariously in building western society. Patty’s diaries unveil the mindset of a woman whose story underscores the historical importance of the dailiness, the ordinariness, the dullness, and the constant vitality of human endeavor.
Patty Bartlett Sessions. Courtesy of Irene S. Poulson.