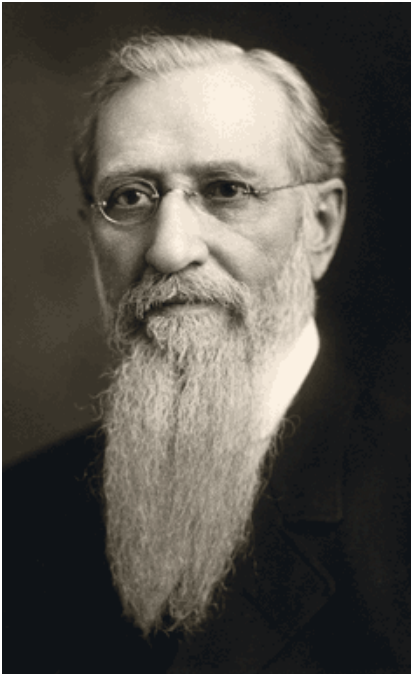


## GRANDPA WAS A POLYGAMIST

By Robert N. Reynolds  
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Since all of my direct ancestors were involved with plural marriage, it seems fitting to present a view of the doctrine and its practice from the eyes of a believing Mormon descendent. For me, it is important to understand what the compelling reasons were, since its practice *sometimes* cost its followers dearly in terms of their comforts, individual family relationships and effectiveness as citizens in the church, community and country.

Although my mother was raised in a polygamous home it was not a subject we discussed often or very thoroughly. My mother loved both of her parents dearly and both her verbal and written references to her parents were always delivered with utmost respect. When I was an adult I opened the subject in discussions with her, occasionally, but failed to obtain a judgment pro or con that would help in forming a personal opinion on my part. I grew up not questioning, but taking our family's history for granted and I accepted it for good.



### Joseph F. Smith

Personal friend of John R. Young, son of Hyrum, Prophet, Apostle and President of the Church.

In 1900, second counselor Joseph F. Smith instructed Seymour B. Young of the First council of seventy, to perform two plural marriages in Mexico. Later that same year, second counselor Smith authorized Patriarch Alexander F. MacDonald to perform new plural marriages in Mexico for any Mexican residents who requested them. He gave both authorizations without the knowledge of the Church President and in spite of Lorenzo Snow's specific refusal to allow such marriages. Because Lorenzo Snow did not know that Alexander F. MacDonald was authorized, he threatened to excommunicate MacDonald in 1901 for performing those marriages. MacDonald stopped performing those ceremonies for four months, and then Apostle Cowley visited Mexico, performed two plural marriages and apparently reassured him that Joseph F. Smith would protect him from Church discipline. Patriarch MacDonald immediately resumed the priesthood work. When he became President, Joseph F. Smith renewed permission for Anthony W. Ivins to

perform plural marriages for Mexican residents. And Ivins did this from 1902 to 1904.<sup>1</sup>

Since the advent of the Internet I have studied this subject with some degree of scrutiny, including those authors who have performed academic research on the practice and its discontinuance resulting from the Wilford Woodruff 1890 Manifesto and the Second Manifesto by Joseph F. Smith in April 1904. My study has been driven by my desire to understand, not so much my great-grandparents decisions, but rather the reason my grandfather, Newel Knight Young, chose to take a second wife after the 1890 Manifesto. My study has convinced me that it takes a considerable degree of maturity and belief in the church to understand and accept the broad issues of secrecy and denial and the almost taboo attitude that evolved and prevails now on this subject with many contemporary Latter-day Saints.

There are several works that I have grown to appreciate because it was only through them that I was able to gain insight about the various positions that were taken post-1890 by the key figures who acted with respect to the marriage of Newel K. Young to his second wife Geneva Cooley on November 19, 1900. The simple fact that he taught in church schools and seminaries for over forty years after the 1890 Manifesto, as a known polygamist, is proof that the church acknowledged and approved the union.

In the post-1890 Manifesto period there were many high church officials still holding keys to the "sealing power." Many, including several apostles and some members of the first presidency, were so committed to their beliefs and to their families that they were not going to let the practice go away without paying a heavy price. It was reasoned by these "diehards" that since the principle was of God and eternal they could morally continue its practice so long as the laws of the United States did not apply. Plural marriages that were later supported by the leadership were performed in Mexico, Canada and on the high seas in the years immediately following 1890. Newel's and Geneva's was one of them.

With regard to my grandfather's decision to practice plural marriage, the conclusion I have reached, that makes the most sense, is that it involved several factors including the mindset that existed in the Mormon colonies where he grew up, together with strong emotional ties to his belief system and an equally strong attraction for Geneva whom he had known since childhood. I have not been satisfied with explanations that would have my grandfather either unduly influenced by his church leaders or illogically attracted to another woman in the absence of his first wife, Tina. His lifelong display of mental eloquence, independence and moral discipline created far more than enough data to refute

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<sup>1</sup> Quinn, D. Michael, *Plural Marriages After the 1890 Manifesto*, August 11, 1991, website. I could find no data to conflict with this apparent statement of fact. Though Quinn is no longer associated with the Church, I have been unable to find a reason not to believe it. It was not offered in a tone of disrespect, as are many of the critiques on this subject.

both of these ideas. It is certain that toward the end of his life he became discouraged when viewing his material accomplishments and his ability to provide adequately for all his children. In my view it is self-serving and just wrong to read into his frustration and disappointment in himself the notion that he was abandoning his beliefs.

Regarding the history of plural marriage, as practiced by the early Saints in the 1800's, my study has led me to conclude the following statement by Richard O. Cowan is correct: *"Joseph Smith first received revelation concerning the principle of plural marriage during the 1830s but was not permitted to teach it at that time. It was not until 1841, after the Saints had settled in Nauvoo, that this principle was taught and practiced secretly by the Church. In 1852 the doctrine was announced publicly for the first time."*<sup>2</sup> The revelation, upon which the practice of plural marriage was said to be based, was made scripture as Section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants. It was recorded on July 12, 1843.

As far as believers are concerned, I think there should be no clear distinction between understanding the doctrine and defending its practice in the pre-manifesto period. With respect to my grandfather Newel K. Young I can testify that he loved both of his wives with all of his heart and soul and that he was true to the end. After my grandmother died one of the first things grandpa did after her death was to seek out the help and assistance of his second wife Geneva, whom he had lived with and loved through the years and together they had produced nine children. Geneva and her family cared for him till the day he died in 1956. He loved each one of them, literally, with all his earthly and spiritual resources. He was respected and loved by all who knew him and everyone associated with him possessed an attitude of veneration toward him. His memorial service was one special eulogy honoring his lifetime of service to others.

Observations and study of my ancestors have led me to conclude unequivocally that each of them believed in and honored the covenants they made to the ends of their lives. At least two served prison sentences for their decisions but did not and would not recant. All lived lives worthy of esteem from their descendents.

The decision for Brigham Young is instructive: *"It was not for me to question whether Joseph was dictated by the Lord at all times and under all circumstances or not. I never had the feeling for one moment, to believe that any man or set of men or beings upon the face of the whole earth had anything to do with him, for he was superior to them all, and held keys of salvation over them. Had I not thoroughly understood this and believed it, I much doubt whether I should ever have embraced what is called "Mormonism." . . . It was not my prerogative to call him in question*

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<sup>2</sup> Richard O. Cowan, *The Doctrine and Covenants, Our Modern Scripture* [Salt Lake City: Book craft, 1984], 210.

*with regard to any act of his life. He was God's servant, and not mine. . . . That was my faith, and it is my faith still.*"<sup>3</sup>

**A** couple of additional references about Brigham Young are both pertinent and entertaining: "*Some of these my brethren know what my feelings were at the time Joseph revealed the doctrine; I was not desirous of shrinking from any duty, nor of failing in the least to do as I was commanded but it was the first time in my life that I had desired the grave, and I could hardly get over it for a long time. And when I saw a funeral, I felt to envy the corpse its situation, and to regret that I was not in the coffin, knowing the toil and labor that my body would have to undergo; and I have had to examine myself, from that day to this, and watch my faith, and carefully meditate, lest I should be found desiring the grave more than I ought to do.*"<sup>4</sup>

**E**vidence in the literature that the principle was taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith abounds. Heber and Vilate Kimball's daughter Helen wrote "*In Nauvoo, my father, among others of his brethren, was taught the plural wife doctrine, and was told by Joseph, the Prophet, three times, to go and take a certain woman as his wife; but not till he commanded him in the name of the Lord did he obey. At the same time Joseph told him not to divulge this secret, not even to my mother, for fear that she would not receive it; for his life (Joseph Smith's) was in constant jeopardy, not only from outside influences and enemies, who were seeking some plea to take him back to Missouri, but from false brethren who had crept like snakes into his bosom and then betrayed him.*"<sup>5</sup>

**P**arley P. Pratt wrote: "*In Philadelphia I had the happiness of once more meeting with President Smith . . . he taught me many great and glorious principles concerning God and the heavenly order of eternity. It was at this time that I received from him the first idea of eternal family organization, and the eternal union of the sexes in those inexpressibly endearing relationships which none but the highly intellectual, the refined and pure in heart, know how to prize, and which are at the very foundation of everything worthy to be called happiness.*"<sup>6</sup>

**E**liza R. Snow became one of the important women of pioneer Utah. She was especially noted for her deeply sensitive religious poetry. The words to "Oh, My Father," a hymn that has become a Mormon tradition, are among her permanent contributions to Mormon culture. It is also probable that she authored the words to "Praise to the Man," a hymn of tribute to the martyred Joseph Smith. She wrote: "*To narrate what transpired within the seven years, in which we built and occupied*

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<sup>3</sup> History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Deseret News, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1909, Volume 5:134-5.

<sup>4</sup> McCloud, Susan Evans, *Brigham Young, A Personal Portrait*, American Fork, Utah, Covenant Communications, 1996.

<sup>5</sup>Contributor, vol. 8 (November 1886-October 1887), Vol. VIII. June 1887. No.8. 311.

<sup>6</sup> McCloud.



*Nauvoo, the beautiful, would fill many volumes. That is a history that never will, and never can 'repeat itself.' Some of the most important events of my life transpired within that brief term, in which I was married, and in which my husband, Joseph Smith, the Prophet of God, sealed his testimony with his blood!"<sup>7</sup>*

**J**oseph Smith said, concerning this doctrine, "I have had no dark revelations. . . Happiness is the object and design of our existence, and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God. But we cannot keep all the commandments without first knowing them, and we cannot expect to know all, or more than we now know unless we comply with or keep those we have already received. That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another."<sup>8</sup>

**P**arley P. Pratt offered this: "It is the plan of the Almighty to make of His noble daughters queens instead of serfs, that woman may rein in the sphere for which she was created. The celestial order of marriage was introduced for this purpose, and God commanded His servants to enter into that holy order preparatory to the day, which is at our doors, when noble and virtuous women.....will be glad to unite themselves to men equally noble and pure."<sup>9</sup>



Five polygamist daughters all born in Mexico where their parents and families sought religious freedom. My mother is the small one on the end next to her sister Marie who would die at age fifteen. The other girls are from left to right: Zitelle, Angeline and Jennie McClellan; same father but two different mothers. This photo was taken in 1914 at Kaysville, Davis County, Utah after the George McClellan and Newel K. Young families had returned to the states.

<sup>7</sup>The Historians Corner, *BYU Studies*, vol. 12 (1971-1972), Number 1 - Autumn 1971. 125-128.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Joseph, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., introduction and notes by B. H. Roberts. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932-1951], 5: 134 - 135.

<sup>9</sup> Parley P. Pratt, Parley P., *Autobiography*, pp. 259-60

Eliza R. Snow, like Helen Mar Kimball, youngest of the Prophet's wives, argued in favor of the institution, as did the majority of women involved in polygamous marriages, despite the difficulties associated with it. In 1885, Snow finished an autobiographical sketch of her life in a narrative, entitled simply "Sketch of My Life." This she provided to the Utah historian, Bancroft. Her marriage to Joseph Smith as a plural wife is referenced in the document which she signed Eliza R. Snow Smith. In essence, she said plural marriage was the spiritual ideal; to "endure" it, *the Saints had to raise their sights, their understandings, their affections and desires to a higher, purer plain.* Her reflections reveal her unshakable faith and how genuinely and wholeheartedly she committed herself to it as an eternal principle.<sup>10</sup>



Vernessa Young at Age 15. This photo was taken after the family moved to Murray  
In the summer of 1921. Lone Peak is in the background.

Mother paid a heavy price for her membership in a polygamist family. It cut her education short and it caused her great pain and anguish to witness the deprivation of material comforts and the suffering of her mother. But, I cannot

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<sup>10</sup> The Historians Corner, pp. 125-126.

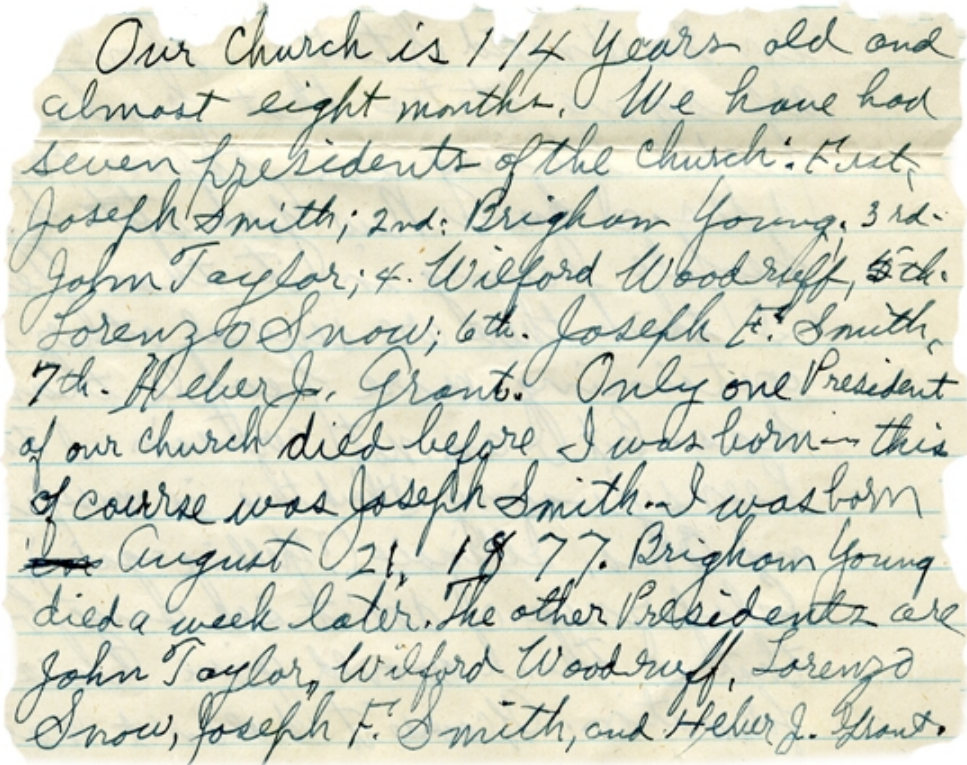
honestly say that things would have been all that different if her mother Tina had been the only wife of her father Newel. It is true there would have been more worldly comforts for Tina and her children. Mother certainly enjoyed a quality home that Tina never knew, but when all is said and done she took none of it with her and it is all scattered and gone. What remains are the memories and feelings of her spirit. The witness of her faith and courage and the discussion of things spiritual with her have greater value to her children now than all her earthly possessions. They are the things of lasting importance.



**Newel K. and Tina Buchanan Young**

**I** was fortunate to know three of my polygamist ancestors as a child. My memories are filled with images of warm and affectionate contact, of smiling faces and soft voices. My curious reflection tells me that what counts in life is what happened when their spirits touched mine. These feelings have never diminished and will be with me forever. As I have progressed through life, studying and learning about the lives of my polygamist ancestors, I have learned of the many trials and tribulations that can be directly attributed to their choice to live in plural marriage.

These facts and realizations have not persuaded me to come down on the side that says what they did was wrong. As I analyze my own experiences in life I must admit that it has been the tough times including those with real heartaches that have produced the greatest spiritual growth.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper, pasted onto the page. The handwriting is in cursive and lists the seven presidents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The text reads: "Our Church is 114 years old and almost eight months. We have had seven presidents of the Church: 1st. Joseph Smith; 2nd. Brigham Young, 3rd. John Taylor; 4. Wilford Woodruff, 5th. Lorenzo Snow; 6th. Joseph F. Smith, 7th. Heber J. Grant. Only one President of our church died before I was born - this of course was Joseph Smith. I was born ~~in~~ August 21, 1877. Brigham Young died a week later. The other Presidents are John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith, and Heber J. Grant."

The above excerpt was taken from a letter written by grandpa Newel K. Young, from Dallas, Texas, to his granddaughter Janet Reynolds in Salt Lake City. It was dated December 2, 1944 less than four months after my grandmother Tina died. Grandpa was 67. It is instructive that he focused on the leadership of the church in a way that demonstrates unequivocally that he felt ownership in his church membership. The church was his; the leaders were his Presidents; and he took satisfaction in knowing that he had lived to witness their administrations. The year was 1944. Grandpa had lived and witnessed the principle of plural marriage all of his days. Although his church had "shelved" the doctrine and retired him from his ministry, he yet believed.

The End