

Title: **Herstories: Ten Autobiographical Narratives of RLDS Women**

Editor: Danny L Jorgensen and Joni Wilson

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Reviewed by Andrew Hamilton for the Association for Mormon Letters

Father, thou hast made us women—

Given us a work to do.

Help us always to be faithful,

Honest, steadfast, ever true.

- Hazel Chambers (see “Herstories” page 1)

Ever since I was a young child I have loved books and I have loved history. Starting at a very young age I pretty much always had a book or two in my hands. I loved science fiction and fantasy but I also loved history and biography. In junior high and high school I signed up for all of the history classes that I could take and I always did all of the reading and then some. With all of this reading I gained a lot of heroes and favorites: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, and many more. From the time that I could pick up a book, until I was in my mid-twenties, pretty much all of my historical and biographical reading in history, especially in the history of the Joseph Smith Restoration movement, was about men. This was mostly because the majority of the available and easy to find historical and biographical books that I could find were about men.

Then something happened. I got married and had a daughter, and another, and another. I wanted my daughters to have heroes that they could look up to. I wanted them to read about and engage in the history of the Restoration, and I wanted as many of those heroes and Restoration heroes as possible to be women. So 17 years ago, I began looking for books about women that I could add to my family’s library. It wasn’t always an easy hunt early on, especially as relates to the Restoration, but then many great books and series began to be released. Some of these great book series on women in the LDS Restoration tradition include “The Life Writings of Frontier Women” (Utah State University Press, currently at 13 volumes), “Women of Faith in the Latter Days” (Three of seven projected volumes have been released through Deseret Book see <http://www.ldswomenoffaith.org/>), and more recently there has been the “Mormon Women

Project” and its related volumes (see <http://www.mormonwomen.com/>). Now, on the RLDS/Community of Christ side of Restoration history, the John Whitmer Historical Association has given us “Herstories: Ten Autobiographical Narratives of RLDS Women” edited by Danny L. Jorgensen and Joni Wilson.

The volume opens with a very important, informative, and well written scholarly introductory essay by Jorgensen titled “The Challenge of RLDS Herstories.” In it Jorgensen explains the history behind this project and the challenges that he has faced in bringing it together. For instance, he once approached Herald House in an earlier stage of this project but they refused to publish because they felt that there would be a lack of interest and that too few people would buy the book. He also explains that while the RLDS/Community of Christ has done a lot to advance the cause of women in their Church, including giving them the priesthood and calling them to the highest levels of the Church hierarchy, they have done little to preserve and promote women’s histories. He challenges them to do more about this, which I will cover in greater detail later.

The first herstory in the book is also the oldest. Emma Locine Whiting Anderson was born in March 1853 and died in June 1922. She was a true pioneer and lived a fascinating life. Her parents and family were members of the original Restoration Church during the days of Joseph Smith and were involved in all of the goings on and occurrences during the Nauvoo period. Some of them even had their houses burned by the mobs. When Emma was born her family were involved with the Cutlerite faction and would be for many years. Eventually they joined the RLDS church. As Emma tells her family’s story, births, sicknesses, moves, school, holidays, building homes and lives, and of course deaths of family members, a fascinating window is opened to the past. The once “ordinary” story of an “ordinary” life has become a treasured window to the past.

The last story, chronologically, is found in chapter 9. It is the story of Berta Bennett Ruoff Nogel who was born in Utah in June 1920 and died in California in October of 2010. In between Emma’s birth in 1853 and Berta’s death in 2010 the stories of these 10 women take the reader all over the map, all through the experiences of life, and through the entire history of the Reorganized Church as it was lived by its ordinary, everyday female members. Their lives, their loves, their struggles, their triumphs all paint a fascinating and wonderful picture that will enrich the life of the reader of the book.

I absolutely enjoyed this book, but there are a few things that I would have liked to have seen done differently. As I mentioned earlier, Jorgensen had a hard time getting the book published because it was feared that not very many people would buy a book such as this and that it would lose money. I realize that John Whitmer Books is a small publishing house with a limited budget. They did do an excellent job with this book (and do with all of their books -- I own several that they have published) but given the importance of this book I would have liked more.

If this book becomes a series, or if John Whitmer publishes similar books in the future, I hope that they are done in cloth instead of paper. These stories and those that follow deserve the best presentation format possible.

I also would have liked to have seen some footnotes and more references in the book. Jorgensen explains in the introduction that he wanted these women's stories to stand on their own and did not want to interfere or muddy them up with analysis and interpretation. But at the same time there were places where more information would have been helpful. There were places where historical figures were mentioned, events referenced, and practices particular to the RLDS Church were discussed. When this happened, some footnotes and explanations would make the book more accessible to non-historians and readers from outside the RLDS/Community of Christ tradition.

Finally, I want to end this review by stating one last hope. This book is a great beginning. In his introduction, Jorgensen states that these 10 stories present a threefold challenge. This challenge is to 1) listen carefully to and empathize with the voices 2) analyze, consider, and interpret the voices and 3) take these stories and insights and use them to build a program that studies the lives of RLDS/Community of Christ women (see page 26). I really hope that, in any way their resources ever permit, in some combination, John Whitmer Books, Herald House, and/or the Community of Christ will pick up the challenge that Jorgensen issues with this book, and put together a project similar to the "LDS Women of Faith" or "Mormon Women" projects.

The Community of Christ is full of women whose stories are just waiting to be told. The book starts with Hazel Chambers asking God to help her to be "Honest, steadfast, ever true." This excellent book presents the stories of 10 women who did all that they could to be just that. I hope that this book is only the beginning and that the Community of Christ and its associated organizations will continue to preserve and tell their women's stories.