

Mormon Samplers: Teaching Traditional Values

by

Jessie L. Embry
Associate Director, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies
Brigham Young University

In 1961 when I was nine years old, I made a small cross stitch "sampler" with the motto "I will bring the light of the gospel into my home" in Primary, the organization for children ages 3 to 12 in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon or LDS). At the time I did not realize that I was following a centuries-old Anglo and American pattern. Since the sixteenth century, girls had been making samplers, mostly in neighborhood schools. Their first project--a sampler--taught them basic stitches. Their second--also a sampler--showcased their skills and served as a model for future projects. The LDS Church encouraged girls to make samplers as one way to preserve the Victorian ideals of women's roles in the twentieth century.

John Palsgrove's 1530 French grammar for English use defines a sampler as "an exemplar for a woman to work by."¹ It taught girls skills needed to create the endless supply of fine stitching that would be required of her during her tenure as wife and mother of a home, or if not married, as a skill to create an income. Almost all common household linen items had to be marked for identification and were so highly valued that they frequently appeared in probate records and wills of the time. Since few pattern books existed, the samplers were the only way to keep track of the stitches learned in youth and expected to be used throughout a woman's life.

¹Donald King, *Samplers* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1960), 2.

Beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing until the later part of the seventeenth century most samplers were created by girls who were in schools specifically designed to help prepare them for the world they would enter at marriage. A skilled seamstress would guide the girls through the design and creation of their samplers. A girl between the age of five and nine usually created two samplers during her tenure at the school. The first would be a plain marking sampler where she learned basic stitches, the alphabet, and numbers. For some, this was the extent of their "education." The second sampler would be finished using fancy embroidery. Only those children whose parents could afford to pay for more "education" were able to complete a second sampler.

Samplers continued to be popular until the nineteenth century. By 1840, however, more girls received formal education. Most schools in larger cities did not include embroidery as a part of the educational curriculum. A 1879 McGuffey Reader stated that a sampler was "a needlework pattern; a species of fancywork formerly much in vogue."² In their classic study, *American Samplers*, Ethel Stanwood Bolton and Eva Johnston Coe lament that samplers died out in 1830, citing better education for girls and less time to stitch. Betty Ring agreed, "In most larger cities, the century-old custom ended abruptly between 1835 and 1840."³

Many English and American women who joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century came from the tradition when samplers were a learning tool and a decorative art. Adult women brought their childhood samplers and patterns to their new spiritual movement. For example, Patty Bartlett Sessions was born

²Betty Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers & Pictorial Needlework, 1650-1850*, vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 25.

³Ethel Stanwood Bolton and Eva Johnston Coe, *American Samplers* (New York; Dover Publications, Inc., 1973), 119-20; Ring, 24.

in Maine in 1795. As a teenager, she began making a large linen sampler. After her marriage to David Sessions when she was seventeen, she put it away "turning to more practical things" including running a household for her ill mother-in-law and becoming a midwife. In 1834 she and her husband joined the Mormon Church. They moved to Utah in September 1848 and six months later Patty started working on the sampler again. In August 1849 she stayed up after delivering a baby and finished the sampler.⁴

Sometime between 1846 and 1849, a young English girl Ann Eckford created a cross-stitched sampler of the temple that the Mormons built in Nauvoo, Illinois. By then the Mormons had left their beautiful city along the Mississippi River and the temple had been destroyed. Eckford used a commemorative temple plate as her pattern. Her decision to put a sacred building on her sampler matched that of other girls' in the nineteenth century. Several American girls stitched Solomon's Temple and others reproduced the churches and other public buildings in their neighborhoods. Eckford's sampler had an added religious significance because the temple represented to her and other Mormons the struggles they had gone through to complete the building and their sadness to see it destroyed after they left.⁵

Elizabeth Hesketh (1805-1857) was born in England and completed her sampler there. It is obviously a second or fancy piece of embroidery meant to show her accomplishments. She probably taught her daughter Grace Liptrot to stitch, and she used

⁴ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of An American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 400-06; Donna Toland Smart, ed., *Mormon Midwife: The 1946-1888 Dairies of Patty Bartlett Sesssion* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1987), 2, 6-7, 110.

⁵ Eckford's sampler has been recreated by modern embroiderers. The sampler was part of a temporary exhibit at the LDS Museum of Church History and Art.

her mother's as a guide to create her first or training sampler.⁶ In 1863 Grace and her husband John Rigby sailed from Liverpool to join the Latter-day Saints in Utah. She brought both samplers.

Although fewer girls did samplers as their educational opportunities grew, fancy needlework continued to be important in the Mormon Church throughout the pioneer period and throughout much of the twentieth century. In 1878 Aurelia Spencer Rogers started an organization to control rowdy boys in Farmington. This expanded into the church-wide Primary organization for children ages 3 to 12. In the beginning, girls did handiwork, including fancy stitching, that they learned at home and then sold at Primary fairs to finance the organization.⁷

In 1929 the Primary developed a new Home Builder program for nine to eleven year old girls.(Larks, Bluebirds, and Seagulls). The purpose of the new program was to train girls to be wives, mothers, and good homemakers. According to a 1953 manual, "Home Builders is a religious, character-forming, leisure-time program. . . . Its objective is to develop proper attitudes toward the Church and home."⁸ The girls started making samplers in 1949 when the Primary adopted a creed for the Home Builders: "Greet the day with a song, make others happy, and serve gladly."

In 1959 the class names changed again, but the program remained very similar. The Home Builders were called Liahomas (Gaynotes, Firelights, Merrihands), an abbreviation of Little Homemakers. The lesson manual explained, "Home, as an

⁶Both samplers are on permanent exhibit at the Museum of Church History and Art.

⁷ Carol Cornwall Madsen and Susan Staker Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 21.

⁸*Home Builder Lessons for Larks* (Salt Lake City: The General Board of the Primary Association, 1953), 7.

institution, is fundamentally a sacred part of Latter-day Saint living." These classes were "to make the home a joyful, happy place in which to live."⁹

Under the new program, the youngest girls, the Gaynotes, still made a sampler, but the cross-stitched motto now had the general theme for the Liahomas, "I will bring the light of the gospel into my home."¹⁰ The girls exhibited their samplers at the Home Builder Holiday, a Mother-Daughter activity, along with the knitted and crocheted items made by the Firelights and Merrie Hands. The lessons reminded the teachers that this would be the first time most girls would exhibit their handiwork, so the leaders should stress the importance of the girls doing their best.¹¹

The Primary program changed again in 1970, and the last two years of Primary became Merrie Miss A and B. The girls made what the Primary called a "Marker, . . . a handprinted pure linen wall hanging in which is stamped the Merrie Miss Code [I will radiate the light of the gospel]." The girls used a sample crewel stitch to embroider the code at the bottom of the marker.¹²

According to the Merrie Miss manual, "working on our Merrie Miss Marker will afford each of us a new experience in gospel living and homemaking skills."¹³ As they worked on their markers, they were told they were doing crewel embroidery because it "stands out more than other types because the yarn with which it is done is much heavier and thicker than regular embroidery floss. Because crewel embroidery is so beautiful, it was the type chosen." As a result, "Your marker is a type of sampler, for it will be hand

⁹*Lessons for Gaynotes* (Salt Lake City: General Board of the Primary Association, 1959), v.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, v.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 225, 232.

¹²*Merrie Miss Course A* (Salt Lake City: General Board of the Primary Association, 1970), xi.

¹³*Ibid.*, 3.

embroidered and the words are a code or a rule by which to live that will bring you happiness."¹⁴

Why did Mormon girls in the mid-twentieth century make samplers? Making samplers was part of an arts and crafts movement that revised old skills in the 1950s and 1960s. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich remembered doing handiwork including cross stitching on a gingham apron (the squares provided a pattern) and embroidering dish clothes with the days of the week. Sewing clothes and making beautiful things were important women art forms. Companies like Creative Circle and Creative Expression promoted "creative domesticity." They encouraged "urging women to make their own holiday decorations or macrame wall hangings and plant holders to display their handicraft talents and personalize their homes."¹⁵ As a result, by the 1970s women's "popular and domestic arts" including quilting and embroidery became art forms.¹⁶

There were unique Mormon twists. Mormon museum owner Shirley Paxman encouraged Mormon women in the 1970s, "Arts and crafts were a medium of expression for Mormon pioneers, and they are for many persons today." She continued, "By gaining knowledge about these old-fashioned crafts with new application, we bridge the span across generations with the needle. . . and above all, with the inherent desire to create that is present in women of every age and time." Paxman wrote, "Happiness and satisfaction .

¹⁴Ibid., 8, 10-11.

¹⁵Blanche Linden-Ward, *American Women in the 1960s: Changing the Future* (New York: Twayne, 1993), 392. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich commented on a version of this paper at the Mormon History Association meeting in May 2003. She suggested that the craft movement had an effect and I should expand my reasons for samplers beyond the Mormon Church's view of women in the home. Ulrich point is well taken. Unfortunately, documenting the crafts movement in the 1950s is very difficult.

¹⁶Rochele Gatlin, *American Women since 1945* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 159.

. . . comes from making articles of beauty . . . with their own hands.” Then she added a modern twist that it was a way to preserve the material of the world in times of "ecological crisis."¹⁷

Paxman then explained a number of pioneer crafts that modern women could do including the sampler which she explained was "of all the . . . needle arts . . . the most typical and characteristic of the times." After explaining the features of a sampler--the alphabet, numbers, verses, and pictures, she noted, "Working a sampler was an art that took time to learn and even more time to do. It was a child's investment in the future. And more importantly, it helped the child learn that she had something to give--that what she created had value for others."¹⁸

There is another underlying reason for samplers which is not as obvious without an understanding of Mormon history and culture. The Mormon Church was organized in the 1830s, and early leaders had strong opinions about the role of family in society. The Church started during a time when society was changing from agricultural/small businesses to an industrial age. As a result, family life changed. Rather than families--men, women, and children--being involved in maintaining the family, the Victorian ideal became the father that went to work and the mother that stayed home. Childhood evolved into a distinct, sheltered period in which to grow up.

Children, however, still needed to learn how to be adults. Boys went to school and were trained in the professions. Girls went to school but they only learned the basics--a little reading, a little writing, a little math--so they could teach their children. The early intricate samplers that girls made are an excellent example of that focus. Girls needed to

¹⁷ Shirley B. Paxman, *Homespun: Domestic Arts and Crafts of Mormon Pioneers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), viii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

learn the alphabet and their numbers, but they also needed to learn their stitches. The embroidery skills were as important if not more important than the alphabet. Samplers changed to cross stitching when learning became more important and stitching was one way to teach the letters.

In the Mormon Church, girls learned the major skills of how to be a woman--a wife and a mother being the main goal--at home from their mothers. Churches and schools played a supportive role in teaching those skills to mothers and daughters. The Primary helped teach girls the homemaking skills that would make their future homes lovely.

By the mid-twentieth century, modern conveniences made housework easier. During World War II, women had had a taste of work outside the home and wanted to be involved more. Immediately following the war though, women were encouraged to return to their homes and make them beautiful for their husbands and children. According to one woman scholar Blanche Linden-Ward, "The celebration of domesticity . . . characterized popular culture in the 1950s." That continued into the 1960s. In 1962 Utah native and head of a national Women Bureau Esther Peterson told the young women that they should prepare for the "business of homemaking."¹⁹

Not everyone was impressed that should be the role of women. In 1963 Betty Friedan referred to "the problem that has no name," the requirement that women follow the "feminine mystique." While Friedan did not refer to samplers, she talked about women who were unfulfilled in their homes. Some sewed so they could "create and achieve and realize their individuality." But these women wanted their daughters to be wives and mothers and "sacrificed little girls to the feminine mystique." When a little girl

¹⁹Linden-Ward, x.

told her mother she wanted to be a doctor, her mother told her "no, you're a girl. You are going to be a wife and mother, like mummy."²⁰

Friedan believed that the women at home were limited and wrote to free them from an oppressed condition. She argued that since women no longer had to make all their own clothing, bake their own bread, and grow their own food they stretched their housework to fill their time. While Friedan called for women to be more involved outside of the home, the Mormon Church hung on tightly to the ideal of women being homemakers. Church leaders encouraged women to stay at home and care for their children while donating countless hours in church and community service.

In 1963, the same year Friedan published her book, Mormon Helen B. Andelin published *Fascinating Womanhood* which spelled out “the ideal woman’ from a man’s point of view,” part of which was being a “domestic goddess.” Andelin asked, “Are women in our day happy as homemakers?” and then answered, “Generally speaking, they are not.” However, she did not encourage the women to leave the home but to learn the “heavenly possibilities” of being a homemaker.. Andelin did not encourage a sampler as a showcase for potential suitors as in the past, she explained girls should “prepare early in life and learn at least the basic homemaking skills.” In addition, she suggested that girls “go beyond the mere call and duty” and “add some feminine touches, . . . doilies, soft curtains and pillows. Her views were not official Mormon ideas, but I remember them being discussed in church settings.²¹

²⁰Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), 11, 213, 222, 225.

²¹Helen B. Andelin, *Fascinating Womanhood* (Santa Barbara, California: Pacific Press, 1963), 140-41; Helen B. Andelin, *The Fascinating Girl* (Santa Barbara, California: Pacific Press, 1969), 12-25. I was very surprised one day while channel-surfing to find a

The Primary manuals, official church publications, did carefully spell out the role that girls would assume as adults. For example, the second Gaynote lesson explained to the teachers, "Home, to most people, is the dearest place on earth, but to Latter-day Saints it has an even deeper meaning. It extends beyond earth. Home, to us, is a holy place, having its pattern in heaven." The instructions continued, "If during their tender years the seeds of good homemaking are planted deep within the hearts of our girls, they may not only become real homemakers in this life, but they may become homemakers in the celestial kingdom of our Father."²²

The lesson for the girls emphasized these same points. After telling some stories about light in the home and greeting the day with a song, the teacher asked the girls what they wanted to be when they grew up. The teacher then told them, "What every girl really wants to be is a wife and mother--a homemaker." The lesson continued, "To be a homemaker is the most glorious work of all," and quoted 1 Timothy 5:14 in the New Testament, "I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the home." The teacher asked the girls for ways they could learn to be a homemaker, and the lesson concluded, "Your mother is the homemaker in your home and you are her helper--a little homemaker. . . . You are forming habits which will help you to become a good homemaker yourself someday."²³

For Mormon girls, the goal remains for women to remain in the home as wives and mothers. While the LDS Church leaders recognize there are exceptions, they still preach the ideal. Church President Ezra Taft Benson (1985-1994) especially stressed that

woman on a wife-switching show repeat the *Fascinating Womanhood* ideals on a national station in 2006.

²²Gaynote, 9.

²³Ibid., 15.

girls should plan to be mothers and mothers should stay at home with their children whenever possible.²⁴

With this continued focus though, girls no longer make samplers unless their mothers teach them. One reason is the Church changed its meeting schedule, and Primary is now held on Sunday instead of a weekday activity. In 1982 the Merrie Miss motto was "I can follow God's plan for me." The girls worked on a "Gospel in Action" award where they learned to help their families in other ways.²⁵ But why not a sampler? For members of the Church, Sunday is a sacred day and members should avoid work. In my Mormon home, any type of sewing--fancy or plain--was not allowed on Sunday, and my mother often told me that every stitch taken on Sunday will have to be picked out with my nose.

Although Primary girls no longer make samplers, teenage girls in the Young Women program (ages 12-18) have goals and values and projects to complete. One is to do an "arts and crafts" project to use in their homes. Loree Romriell, my co-author on another article on this subject, taught her daughter Melissa, how to create counted cross-stitch designs. The Romriells use computer programs to design patterns and market them throughout the world. Melissa created a sampler with Church President Gordon B. Hinckley's "B" instructions to teenage members.

The Romriells also taught Young Women in their congregation how to make a sampler. As Loree watched them struggle with the stitches, she realized these teenagers were connecting with their foremothers' traditions and learning their role in Mormon society of wife, mother, and homemaker.

²⁴ *Church History in the Fullness of Times* (Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 2000), 604-05.

²⁵ *Merrie Miss A* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), v, 24-28.