

Transmitting Culture by Preserving Women's History

Connie Lamb

Introduction

Manuscript collections around the world contain the writings of people from varied cultures – the words of life and living. The Library at Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah, focuses on collecting the writings of Latter-day Saints or Mormons and a part of that is the women's collection. Interest in the lives and contributions of women increases with each decade. Much of history was given through the eyes of men, and more needs to be done on women's lives and views. The purpose of the women's manuscript collection is to document women's life experiences in order to illustrate their roles, daily living and accomplishments. The value of these collections for understanding the past and giving substance to the present is immense. Culture and family values are passed along in large part due to women's involvement in children's and other women's lives. A quote from Carol Cornwall Madsen, a historian and author, explains this well.

Women have long been recognized as preservers, determined to find ways to hold on to the past and link it to the present and future. Maybe in their role as creators of life they feel more keenly the continuity of generations and seek to connect them through a shared memory, either through artifacts lovingly passed from generation to generation, or through oral and written means whereby traditions and customs as well as thoughts and experiences are carefully transmitted.¹

Preserving Women's History

The manuscript collections of women that I will be discussing are housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. As stated, the collection focuses on Mormon women and also on western U.S. women, those who came to the Intermountain region in search of peace, freedom to

worship and permanent settlements to build their homes and lives. The mountains provided both blessings and challenges to these women as they helped establish communities throughout the West. Generations have grown up around this area and many descendants have stayed on throughout the 20th century while others have dispersed to other places. Reactions to the mountains varied depending upon their places of origin. Women of the pioneering West were viewed as hearty and forward thinking. They used what nature offered to sustain their families and vitalize the churches and communities. A couple of quotes from diaries demonstrate some reactions to the mountains. Rosy Antle wrote, “I and several others went up on the biggest mountain I ever was on. I think we was nearer heaven than will ever be again on this earth” (1865). Eva Charlotta Anderson Bjork wrote in her diary about emigrating from Sweden to Utah and mentions the big open country and the mountains which she explains are “just like the pyramids in Egypt” (1884). Eliza Moore Rawlinson recalls in her memoirs that after her family had settled in the town of Bountiful, they sacrificed to visit her parents in Joseph, crossing the mountains with a horse-drawn wagon (1914). Her collection, along with many others, provide insight into the pioneer lifestyle. Archival collections contain the resources for studying women’s individual lives – their reactions, movements, views on events as well as their social interactions.

The resources collected by Special Collections include diaries, reminiscences, biographies, letters, poetry, publications, oral histories, photographs, scraps of paper and many other print items along with a few artifacts. Donors may gift materials to Special Collections of their own volition or through invitation; some papers may be purchased.

Archivists seek and accept records for permanent preservation. This is a long-term commitment, and they do not make it lightly. Quite considerable resources—of

staff time for processing; staff time for assisting patrons, cost of physical conservation, including proper housing and necessary restoration—are pledged when a body of material is accessioned for preservation in a future far beyond anyone’s knowledge or imagination.²

Women’s collections may consist of one item or many boxes and any amount in-between. They may be from individuals or from groups or institutions and are not in one area of the manuscript archives but are scattered throughout. In totality they provide the historical and contemporary materials that give context and understanding to women’s lives and times.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are a record-keeping people. Instructed through scriptures and by leaders of the Church, members are encouraged to keep ecclesiastical and personal records, including life histories. Spencer W. Kimball, a former president of the LDS Church stressed that records from the past are invaluable to us today and that we should continue to record the things we do, the things we say, and the things we think.³ Passing these records on to later generations is valuable to family members and others, and if preserved into perpetuity in an archive, they can be read, studied and used by a wide variety of people for understanding individual and communal lives. As David Gracy states, “Archives (records) are for use, not dead storage. Indeed, use is inherent in the concept of permanent value, and archival preservation is accorded only to records expected to be used through the years.”⁴

Accessing Archival Material

Since Special Collections and Archives are limited use areas, being able to identify materials and access them is necessary. Manuscripts and other materials are expected to be used onsite. For years, only printed lists and catalogs were available, but in the technology age, we have other wonderful options. Most archives are now

digitizing items for full-text access online; however, this is a labor-intensive process so only a small portion of all manuscripts is available, including at BYU. Printed registers and guides are still produced, many of which are now also online, making it much easier to find which institution has what items and to find what is contained within a collection. As collections are processed, they are given a manuscript number and arranged either by type of material or chronologically. For large collections, a register may be produced giving a detailed outline of what is contained in the collection by box and folder number. Some of these registers are currently available online and can be found through searching the library catalog. For the women's collections at BYU, a guide is being produced, both in print and online, to provide awareness and access. It is an ongoing project and is added to each year. Although it currently references mainly small collections and only a small number of the total, as more records are added, it will become increasingly valuable as a research tool. The database contains about 200 women's collections with each entry including a short biography and abstract which are textword searchable making subject searching available. The URL for the *Guide to Women's Manuscript Collections* is <http://www.lib.byu.edu/WomensManuscript/>.

Transmission of Culture and Values

There are three ways that values and culture are transmitted to other persons, whether of the same generation or later generations: intra-generational, inter-generational, and multi-generational. I will discuss each of these using examples from the Manuscript Archives at BYU. Intra-generational transmission can occur through any personal contact, but in this case, I will speak about women's clubs and societies. Clubs were very popular in the Nineteenth Century and some have continued through the

Twentieth and even into the Twenty-first Century. Examples are literary or book clubs, social clubs, service clubs and a variety of societies. BYU Special Collections is particularly interested in obtaining records of local clubs and has been quite successful in this. Two examples are the 19th Century Club and the Yesharah Society. The 19th Century Club was started in Provo, Utah in 1891 and continues today. The Club began with the goal of bringing women together to learn as well as to enrich their community. One of their greatest achievements was to help secure funding from Andrew Carnegie for the original Provo City Library and more recently, for the newest library. Organizational records include minute books, programs, rolls, scrapbooks, correspondence and artifacts. The Yesharah Society was founded in 1928 for returned lady missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Chapters were established at BYU and several towns throughout Utah, but only a couple remain active today. The Society was formed as both a social and service group. It's express purpose was to perpetuate the missionary spirit and to allow its members to give service within the community as well as to promote love, unity and friendships within the society. Members participated in service such as visiting the sick at convalescent homes and hospitals, supporting children's institutions, visiting families of those away at war, and donating histories and books to the BYU Library. The records for this society include history and bylaws, programs and minutes from various chapters, music, and miscellaneous ephemera. Through these organizations, members share values and experiences with those mainly of their own generation.

The value of inter-generational passage of life's experiences is provided in a quote by President Kimball.

What could you do better for your children and your children's children than to draw upon your journal to write the story of your life, your triumphs over adversity, your recovery after a fall, your progress when all seemed black, your rejoicing when you finally achieved? Some of what you write may be humdrum, but there will also be rich passages that will be quoted by your posterity.⁵

BYU Library contains hundreds of collections by women that can be viewed by not only their descendents but by others of later generations. What is written has personal meaning to direct descendents and can help to pass values, customs, beliefs, etc. on to those who come after through generational relations. BYU Archives has some papers from two or three generations of related women. One example is the Jean Gordon Lauper collection which contains her papers as well as items from and about her mother, Margaret Gordon. Jean's daughter, Claudia Lauper Bushman, has also donated her papers to Special Collections, so three generations are represented and can highlight similarities and differences between the generations and what has been transmitted.

In 2004, the Women's History Initiative at BYU and L. Tom Perry Special Collections cosponsored an exhibition on Mormon Women titled, "To Tell the Tale: Preserving the Lives of Mormon Women". One display case was labeled "Inter-generational" and included such items as pedigree charts, letters to grandchildren, scrapbooks, reminiscences of parents by children, etc. that are passed from one generation to another. Examples of what we included are an account by SuZan Noguchi Swain Firmage about her parents' Japanese heritage, a wooden Family Genealogy scrapbook with photos, poems to daughters, family histories, reminiscences of Mary Powell Lindsey's children especially about prayer, Tamma Durfee Miner's memoirs written to a granddaughter, and a life sketch of Bathsheba Smith by her granddaughter. A visitor to the exhibition, was surprised to see a valentine displayed in the case that she

had given to her grandmother as a child. She was amazed and pleased to know that her grandmother cherished the valentine enough to keep it over the years and include it in her donated papers. It was a touching experience for her.

The last category is multi-generational which could be represented by a church congregation or a community function where several generations intermix and share and transmit culture, heritage and values. Many of the collections from women include their service in Relief Society, the women's organization within the LDS Church and other service within the community. Elaine Cannon (1922-2003), a former president of the Young Women's Organization of the LDS Church, wrote a column for youth which ran in a local newspaper. She also wrote many books and performed great service as a leader to younger generations. Another example is the Freedom Festival papers. The festival celebration is held in Provo, Utah each Fourth of July and focuses on community involvement for all ages as a bonding experience. The records demonstrate a multi-generational activity that transmits the values and interests of a particular city over several decades. Maria Johnson (1888-1974) never married but had a wonderful career in public health, teaching nursing, and nurse administration. Although she did not have direct descendents, her papers could be inspiration to students today who are aspiring to become nurses.

Conclusion

Everyone has a story to tell. When those stories are preserved in a safe repository, they allow for the great opportunity to study individual lives, societies at particular times, organizational influence, and family heritage. They provide a feeling of connectedness. Keeping records and histories is invaluable to current and future

generations. Archival institutions perform important work to preserve, organize, and provide public access to those records, papers, histories, etc. Like all places, people in Utah and the Intermountain region transmit values and culture in important ways through recording life histories and keeping records. All people, especially women, should keep records and histories to perpetuate heritage and provide insight to their lives and cultures.

¹ Madsen, Carol Cornwall. "Women's Traces: The Words They Left Behind", 1991.

² Gracy, David B. *An Introduction to Archives and Manuscripts*. New York: Special Libraries Association, 1981, p.12.

³ Kimball, Spencer W. *President Kimball Speaks Out*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1981, p. 57.

⁴ Gracy, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁵ Kimball, *op. cit.*, p. 58.