

Emma Smith's 1846-47 Recollections of Polygamy

The following are from various persons who visited Emma Smith the widow of Joseph Smith or knew about the secret practice of polygamy in Nauvoo. They are not first person accounts but are from persons who were acquainted with Emma and some of which communicated to them the activities of Smith in the 1840s and even during the Kirtland period of Church History.

According to Buddy Youngreen, "Emma left with her children for Fulton City, Whiteside County, Illinois, on 12 September 1846 ... she and her family returned posthaste to Nauvoo by land, arriving 19 February 1847."

(Reflections of Emma, [Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1982], p. 119, fn. 63)

"Joseph W. Coolidge reported to Joseph F. Smith a conversation he had with Emma about 1846 regarding Nauvoo polygamy. Emma remarked to Coolidge that 'Joseph had abandoned plurality of wives before his death.' Coolidge, family friend and administrator of the Prophet's estate, indicated that he had personal knowledge that the Mormon leader had not discontinued the ancient practice. '[Emma] insisted that he had, Coolidge insisted that he had not, for he [Coolidge] "knew better."' Emma Smith retorted with exasperation, 'Then he was worthy of the death he died'."

(Ibid., p. 82, fn 32; from the Diary of Joseph F. Smith, 28 August 1870, LDS Archives)

This report was repeated to Joseph F. Smith over twenty years after Joseph Coolidge spoke with Emma.

Another individual who visited Emma Smith in Nauvoo was former Apostle William E. McLellin. He discussed the events concerning her husband Joseph at Nauvoo and previously during the Kirtland period. The conversation took place in August 1847.

In a letter to her son Joseph Smith III, written in January 1861 he wrote:

"I do not wish to say hard things to You of your Father, but Joseph [III], if You will only go to your own dear mother, she can tell You that he believed in Polygamy and practiced it long before his violent death! That he delivered a revelation sanctioning, regulating, and establishing it - and that he finally burned the awful document before her eyes. Elder [William] Marks can tell you that (before its conflagration) it was read in the High Council of Nauvoo, over which he presided. Your Mother told me these items when I was in Nauvoo. I am not dealing in fictions, nor in ill founded slander - and would now feel glad if these things had never been enacted. But Sir, I have felt it a solemn duty to lay these items before You. And Sir, Your Mother (if she feels disposed) can give You as rather black catalogue reaching back as far as the date of your birth. Then, Sir, if you are honest before the Heavens yourself, never, no never proclaim again publicly or privately that 'I believe my father was a good man', whilst the means to know his real

character lies so near You - even in the bosom & memory of your Mother!"

(Letter of William E. McLellin to Joseph Smith III, 10 January 1861, RLDS Archives)

Ten years later in 1872 McLellin wrote again to Joseph the III:

"Now Joseph [III] I will relate to you some history, and refer you to your own dear Mother for the truth. You will probably remember that I visited your Mother and family in 1847, and held a lengthy conversation with her, retired in the Mansion House in Nauvoo. I did not ask her to tell, but I told her some stories I had heard. And she told me whether I was properly informed.

Dr. F[rederick]. G. Williams practiced with me in Clay Co. Mo. during the latter part of 1838. And he told me that at your birth your father committed an act with a Miss Hill - a hired girl. Emma saw him, and spoke to him. He desisted, but Mrs. [Emma] Smith refused to be satisfied. He called in Dr. Williams, O[liver]. Cowdery, and S[idney]. Rigdon to reconcile Emma. But she told them just as the circumstances took place. He found he was caught. He confessed humbly, and begged forgiveness. Emma and all forgave him. She told me this story was true!!

Again I told her I heard that one night she missed Joseph and Fanny Alger. she went to the barn and saw him and Fanny in the barn together alone. She looked through a crack and saw the transaction!!! She told me this story too was verily true.

Now I would not have told you this had it not been for one thing. You said in your speech at Amboy[,] April 6th[,] 1860, 'I believe my father was a good man, and a good man never could have promulgated such doctrines.' You refer to Polygamy. Now let me tell you my dear Sir. I asked your Mother particular[ly] upon this point. She said, one night after she and Joseph had retired for the night, he told her that the doctrine and practice of Polygamy was going to ruin the church. He wished her to get up and burn the revelation. She refused to touch it even with tongues [sic]. He rose from his bed and pulled open the fire with his fingers, and put the revelation in and burned it up. But copies of it were extant, so it was preserved. You say, 'I have never believed it and never can believe it.' Can you dispute your dear Mother? She related this to me, and will if you ask her[,] tell you the same thing. It made a powerful impression on my mind at the time, and I've often reflected on it since. Now Sir suppose you could be convinced that your father not only believed in Polygamy but actually practiced it his individual self, then what would you say - and then do about it? Was he an adulterer so long ago, and still a 'good man.' [?] You say, 'I believe in the doctrines of honesty and truth.' So do I. But I can't believe your father continued to be a religiously honest man. No sir. I can't for if I should I would have to believe your Mother a liar, and that would be hard for me to do, considering my acquaintance with her."

(Letter of William E. McLellin to Joseph Smith III, commenced in July 1872, RLDS Archives)

McLellin wrote as follows concerning his discussion with Emma Smith:

"On Saturday, the 28th of August [1847], we visited the fated city of Nauvoo, and put up at the Nauvoo House, which is excellently kept by Mrs. Emma Smith, the enterprising widow of Joseph Smith, deceased. I spent about twenty-four hours in the deserted, and yet partly populated city. I had many hours conversation with Mrs. Smith, and learned many particulars from her, relative to the history of her husband from her first acquaintance with him, until the time of his cruel death."
(William E. McLellin, Ed., The Ensign of Liberty 1 [December 1847]:34.)

McLellin also explained:

"Mrs[.] Joseph Smith, the widow of the Prophet, told me in 1847 that she knew her husband - the Prophet practiced both adultery and polygamy."
(A photograph published in The Salt Lake Tribune, 2 December 1985)

On 6 September 1878 McLellin was visited by Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, a son of Hyrum Smith. Joseph F. Smith recorded in his diary:

"He said Emma Smith told him that Joseph was both a polygamist and an adulterer ..."
(Joseph Fielding Smith, Compiler, Life of Joseph F. Smith, [Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938], p. 239)

Lovina Smith Walker, who was the daughter of Hyrum Smith, stated that she had talked with Emma. Lovina was nineteen years old at the time she was at Fulton City.

"I, Lovina Walker, hereby certify that while I was living with Aunt Emma Smith, in Fulton City, Fulton Co., Illinois, in the year 1846, that she told me that she, Emma Smith, was present and witnessed the marrying or sealing of Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Maria Lawrence and Sarah Lawrence to her husband, Joseph Smith, and that she gave her consent thereto.

Lovina Walker.

We hereby witness that Lovina Walker made and signed the above statement on this 16th day of June, A.D. 1869, at Salt Lake City, S.L. County, Utah Territory, of her own free will and record [accord].

Hyrum S. Walker,
Sarah E. Smith,
Joseph F. Smith."

(As quoted in Joseph F. Smith, Jr., Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage, [Independence: Zion's Printing and Publishing Co., 1905], p. 73)

George A. Smith wrote to Joseph Smith III about Emma:

"She gave your father four wives with her own hands; this intelligence I had from your father's mouth."
(Letter of George A. Smith to Joseph Smith III, 9 October 1869, p. 5; P 15, f5, RLDS Archives)

In 1874 William W. Blair talked to James Whitehead. To make the diary passage clearer than the few letters intended for words in Blair's diary we have included brackets for those words in the following portion of the diary entry of 17 June 1874:

"[Whitehead] Says J[oseph] did te[ach]- p[olygamy]- and p[RACTICE]- too. That E[mma]- knows it too that She put h[a]nd of Wives in Jos[eph] ha[n]d"

(William W. Blair Diary, entry of 17 June 1874, J 14, RLDS Archives)

When Joseph Smith III did interview his mother in February 1879 (over thirty years after talking to Lovina Smith and William McLellin) the questions he carefully asked Emma produced negative responses by her. (see The Saints' Herald 26 [1 October 1879]:290. See also Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet's Wife, "Elect Lady," and Polygamy's Foe, 1984, pp. 300-02 and Roger D. Launius, "Methods and Motives: Joseph Smith III's Opposition to Polygamy, 1860-90," Dialogue 20 [Winter 1987]:105-120.)