Review of "Emily Dow Partridge Smith Young on the Witness Stand: Recollections of a Plural Wife," by H. Michael Marquardt
Reviewed by Craig L. Foster, May 2001

Michael Marquardt has presented an interesting paper concerning the background of the Temple Lot Case. He has demonstrated that Emily Partridge Smith Young’s testimony offers insight into the plural marriages of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as well as the secret practice of plural marriage in Nauvoo.

While the paper does shed some more light on this period of Church history, it falls short of something I believe would be helpful in understanding the impact of plural marriage on this woman’s life and, therefore, giving an example of what life was like practicing Latter-day Saint plural marriage.

Having said that, I need to admit that Emily Partridge’s experience was not like most women who entered plural marriage. She was one of the few who married in secret and, when cast out of the Smith home, had to bear her pain in secret. She was one of the select few who were sealed to Joseph Smith during his lifetime. After Joseph’s death, she married Brigham Young, second president of the LDS Church. Emily was part of the elite through not one but two significant marriages. In her later years, she was honored as one of the plural wives of Joseph Smith.
However, for the most part, Emily Partridge’s life was one of sorrow. Todd Compton, in his ground-breaking work, *In Sacred Loneliness*, referred to Emily as a "Latter-day Hagar."¹ Perhaps that’s a fitting description. Obviously, Michael Marquardt did not have the space and time to go into the details of Emily’s life and experiences. Nor do I have the time.

Suffice it to say that by the time she married Brigham Young: she had been forced to move at least four times; she had witnessed and experienced mob persecution; had seen her father, Edward Partridge, tarred and feathered; lived in poverty in over-crowded conditions; suffered from the deaths of siblings and her own father when she was only fifteen years old; lived with Joseph Smith and his family as a servant; and, married Joseph Smith as a plural wife and was later cast out in humiliation by Emma Smith.

As a secret wife of Joseph Smith, Emily could not reveal her connection to the prophet when he was murdered. She later wrote about going to his and Hyrum Smith’s viewing, "I went with the rest, as a stranger, none suspecting the extra sorrow that was in my heart."²

Even her marriage for time to Brigham Young and sealing to Joseph Smith was, for a time, kept secret. When she gave birth (in October 1845) to her first child, she had to keep his birth hidden. It was not until she left Nauvoo and was on
the trail that it became common knowledge she was a plural wife of Brigham Young.

Being the wife of Brigham Young was, at times, very difficult because he was so busy. Emily was among the first to leave Nauvoo in February 1846. However, she was left to fend for herself as Brigham directed the migration. She later remembered wandering with her little baby in her arms from one campfire to another, some people taking pity on her and giving her food and a place to sleep. Emily eventually came to Utah in 1848, settling in Salt Lake City.

While Emily bore Brigham Young seven children, their relationship was less than ideal. Indeed, there were times of frustration, sadness, and loneliness on Emily’s part, and, I am sure, of at least frustration on Brigham’s part. Both recognized that Emily and her children were sealed to Joseph Smith for eternity and Brigham Young, on at least one occasion, reminded her of that fact.

In 1898, on the fifty-fourth anniversary of the death of Joseph Smith, Emily wrote, "Sad and sorrowful has been the long years since that terrible day. Lonely and desolate have been the days without [his] society. When, Oh when will there be a reunion of the loved ones?" She died the following year at the age of seventy-five.
I personally view Emily to be one of the more important women in Church history. Did she contribute as much as women like Eliza R. Snow and Emmeline B. Wells. No. Even so, her first-hand experience with Nauvoo plural marriage is significant for historians. What is more, even after all of her trials and sorrows, she firmly believed in the sacred origins of plural marriage. In 1879 she wrote, "The Principle [of] Polygamy or ‘Plural Marriage’ is as pure as the Gods." She left that conviction for generations of descendants.

To this day, there are, I would venture to guess, thousands of descendants. Among those descendants have been the architects of the Church Administration Building (Don Carlos Young) and the Church Office Building (George Cannon Young). There have been at least one general authority, stake presidents, patriarchs, bishops, community leaders, and even former football great, Steve Young.

Numerous are Emily Dow Partridge Smith Young’s descendants who honor her for her sacrifices. And, of her descendants who are aware of her sealing to Joseph Smith, they proudly consider themselves to be the spiritual heirs of the prophet and a part of his large family.


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 47.