

People

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Both descendants of polygamous Mormon families, Vicky Burgess-Olson and husband Eric are strictly monogamous. In their pickup truck are Vicky with Abraham, 1; Eric with Seth, 3, and Erica, 6; and, in the tub, Eden, 7.



IN HER OWN
WORDS
**A FEMINIST
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For her Ph.D. thesis in counseling psychology at Northwestern University, Utah-born Vicky Burgess-Olson felt herself drawn to an examination of her Mormon roots and the peculiar institution of early Mormon families—polygamy. The great-great-granddaughter of a man with four wives, Dr. Burgess-Olson, 33, studied the diaries kept by Mormon pioneer women between 1847 and 1885. She followed up her ground-breaking research by editing *Sister Saints*, a study of 19th-century Mormon women, published by Brigham Young University. A confirmed feminist and mother of two sons and two daughters, Burgess-Olson recently completed summer training at Fort Sam Houston as a ma-

for in the U.S. Army Reserve. She is a school psychologist in Provo, Utah, where her husband, Eric Olson, 34, an Egyptologist, teaches at Brigham Young. Dr. Burgess-Olson talked with Linda Witt of PEOPLE about her research.

The 341 pioneer Mormon women you studied shared 104 husbands. How many were happy with their situation?

Just like today's marriages, some were, some weren't. But the idea that polygamist wives were necessarily jealous of each other is false. Some 91 percent of the wives I studied gave consent for the second and further marriages. Often it was the woman who

suggested, "Maybe we'd better take another wife," and sometimes the first wife gave the subsequent bride away at the wedding.

Still, some wives must have objected?

Well, yes. One disgruntled wife sent all the kids into the parlor, where her husband was courting his newest.

What was the role of sex?

We really don't know. Even in their diaries, these women were stereotype Victorians. They only referred obliquely to sex—writing how they wished their husbands were around, or saying how cold their beds had gotten. We do know polygamist wives had fewer, but



Brigham Young, who settled the Mormon church in Utah in 1847, had 56 wives and 57 children. He died in 1877 at the age of 76.

A multiple-wife Mormon family posed before their sod-thatched cabin in Echo City, Utah in 1869. Polygamy was not banned until 1890.



Words CONTINUED

healthier, children than monogamous wives.

How did wives adapt to each other?

Most women went through a period of adjustment to having another woman share her husband. But then they would describe how they had "overcome jealousy" and were happy. There is a great deal of evidence that these women genuinely came to love each other. They celebrated birthdays together and wrote poetry to one another. One of them talked about the enjoyment of being a member of a family with three other wives and only having to deal with the husband one week a month.

How did polygamy become a Mormon practice?

Basically through "divine revelation" in 1843 to Joseph Smith, who founded the church. Mormons called polygamy "living the principle" and believed that all partners to a marriage were "sealed" together for eternity. Much has been made of Brigham Young's 56 wives. But only 15 of them bore his 57 children. Some of his marriages were likely made for spiritual convenience. Unmarried Mormons cannot enter the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom.

What other factors explain polygamy?

One is history. Joseph Smith grew up in New York State when many religious sects, such as the Shakers and Oneidas, were trying all sorts of different social patterns, many of them involving sex and marriage.

Were there more women than men in Utah in those days?

No, that's a common misconception. Polygamy didn't originate because of numerical imbalance. In fact, many young men felt bitter that young women often chose to marry older, established and already married men.

Why did women make this choice?

Throughout history women seem to have been very calculating about whom they marry. They often choose rich and older men. In the same way Mormon girls often married the prominent local bishops rather than the

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Excommunicated by the Mormons, Alex Joseph lined up with nine of his 13 wives in Utah in 1975. At last count, he had only 10.

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fuzzy-faced young farmers their own age. Bishops even stole the girlfriends of their young sons.

You write that plural marriages were often liberating. How?

When the husbands were away visiting other wives in other houses, the wives they left behind ran farms, ranches or silkworm operations, and were literally heads of households. If the families shared the same house, the women had different assignments and could usually do what they liked best. Not being stuck with so much of the housework freed them for things like going to concerts or church. Of the sister wives I studied, 54 percent had full-time jobs outside the home.

What did they accomplish?

The first woman state senator in America was Dr. Martha Hughes Cannon of Utah. Ellis Reynolds Shipp is another plural wife who became a doctor. Her sister wife, Maggie, went East to medical school first, but dropped out temporarily. Since the family had already paid the tuition, Ellis left her children, traveled East and got the degree. Maggie followed, then the husband. Finally the three M.D.s started a public health journal together.

Isn't that an unusual case?

No, other women became poets, lawyers, businesswomen, newspaper publishers. One of the first newspapers for and by women west of the Mississippi was the *Woman's Exponent*, launched by Mormon women in Utah.

Did they back women's liberation?

Today's concept didn't exist for them. Yet many were involved feminists. One reason women got the vote in Utah as early as 1870 was because the church hierarchy wanted to show the U.S. that Mormons weren't suppressing women in spite of polygamy. Brigham Young also encouraged feminism because he needed women to build the state. He once said the church wanted women to run the stores as well as sweep the houses.

Were prominent Mormon women among the activists?

Many were, including Brigham Young's daughter, Zina Young Williams, who attended the 1879 National Woman Suffrage Association meeting in Washington and asked Congress to legitimize the children of polygamous marriages. And Susa Young Gates, Brigham Young's 41st child, was a friend of the suffragette Susan B. Anthony, who journeyed to Utah in 1896 to attend the statehood ceremonies.

Why was polygamy abandoned?

Under pressure from the federal government, the Mormon church had to give up the principle in 1890 simply to survive.

What happened to the multiple wives?

It became terribly difficult. No one knew who was married and who wasn't. Some went underground. Other men divorced their first wife and married their second, then divorced her and married their third and so on, in

order to make the children legitimate. Families were wrenched apart, and often husbands and wives were jailed.

Polygamy seems to have surfaced again in Utah. Is it accepted by the church?

No. Every Mormon is encouraged to go to the temple frequently, but must first get a temple "recommend." If you are sympathetic to polygamists, you are denied the recommend. If you are a polygamist yourself, you are excommunicated. That's the official position. But in reality, there is a great deal of tolerance of polygamy.

Do you know anyone who is practicing plural marriage?

Yes. I found out about one family when we got an invitation to a daughter's wedding under a name I didn't recognize. The wife explained, "Didn't you know we're polygamists? The name I use publicly is just one I picked out so the authorities couldn't trace it." She added, "We have two other wives." Later on I learned how it works. All the babies are born at the individual mother's home with the help of a circuit-riding doctor and a midwife. The husband considers himself a Mormon, even though he is excommunicated; all the children attend church regularly. There are no real statistics on how many polygamous families like this exist. The civil authorities seem to want to ignore the situation and not prosecute.

Do you think polygamy will come back in fashion?

No, it's too expensive, too complicated. Most modern Mormons are very typical, middle-class Americans with typical middle-class aspirations. Polygamy wouldn't work for them.

Then why is a study of polygamy relevant?

Many modern communes are essentially polygamist; it is a very real issue today.

Would you ever consider polygamy?

No, I wouldn't want to share my husband. But then sometimes I think, well, maybe—if we could get a good housekeeper, one who could sew, and I was still the sexy cute wife. □

Besides editing a history of Mormon women, Vicky is a psychologist for a Utah school district that is 90 percent Mormon.

MICHAEL BAUREY

