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"I Didn't Want to Leave the House, but He Compelled Me to": A Personal Examination of a Mormon Family

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“I Didn’t Want to Leave the House, but He Compelled Me To”

A Personal Examination of a Mormon Family

F. Ross Peterson

It is most appropriate that we gather this evening in this restored historical building. We also gather under the banner of the annual Leonard J. Arrington Lecture on Mormon History and the O.C. Tanner Symposium on Religious Studies. Leonard Arrington and Obert Tanner exemplified through their own research, writing, and intellectual and personal philanthropy the very best of both Mormon and religious studies. Born early in the twentieth century, Tanner and Arrington struggled with rural poverty, developed a passion for education, and devoted their respective lives to open honest historical and religious inquiry. Through their philosophical and financial support, scholarly journals, such as *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and *The Journal of Mormon History* as well as university presses expanded the publication opportunities for many scholars.

Fortunately for me, my path intersected theirs many times in life, which has continued since their passing. As a student at Utah State University, I studied with Leonard Arrington, and he played a very crucial role in the selection of my dissertation topic. In the late winter of 1965, I went into his office in Old Main and asked for advice relative to a topic.

He asked, “Do you want a topic in Mormon history?”

“No, sir,” I replied.

“Why is that?” Leonard responded.

“I want to do modern U.S. and do not want to be categorized as a Mormon doing Mormon history.”

“How about an Idaho topic?” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Enough said. I left his office with over forty possible dissertations scrawled on an envelope.

Obert C. Tanner called me and invited me to come to his office on South State in Salt Lake City. My wife, Kay, and I had accepted the co-editorship of *Dialogue*, and he reminded me of the significance of independent voices in the scholarship of religious studies, especially Mormon Studies. At one point he said, “Do you know what you are in for?” I naively said, “Yes, Sir!” He smiled and thoughtfully replied, “It will not be easy.” As usual, Obert Tanner was right.

The Arrington-Tanner connection influenced me in another important way. Both men asked me to read their autobiographical manuscripts prior to publication. At various times, I had assisted them on other projects, and I was honored to review each man’s assessment of a life—his own. Suffice it to say, both men believed strongly in an honest, open, and analytical approach to autobiography and religious studies. However, both held back information that they felt might offend others. They left their mark on fields of study that deserve the best scholarship.

Through their own memoirs, the several biographies Arrington wrote, and especially the autobiography Obert published of Annie Clark Tanner, his mother, they each remind future generations of scholars that religious studies is ultimately about people. Theology and philosophy are important. The theological issues of faith, grace,

works, prophecy, and scriptural interpretation are significant because they effect individual lives.¹ Religious organizations and denominations develop rituals, customs, ordinances, catechisms, and rites, but how people respond or react to their religious culture is telling. When you read the story of Annie Clark Tanner or the Arrington <AU: unless you mean Harold Silver, not Charles Redd> biography of Charles Redd, it is apparent that among the periods of Mormon history that magnified internal and external personal conflicts over religion were the times after the two manifestos that abandoned plural marriage as an official church doctrine. The effect of this policy change on individuals shows why religious studies is so intriguing. When choosing to study family history and religion, the historian may enter a path of difficult and conflicting interpretations.² That is the path I have chosen this evening.

Both post-manifesto periods were critical times in Mormon history . After four decades of public ridicule, spirited ecclesiastical defense, legal first amendment maneuvering all the way to the Supreme Court, denial of statehood for Utah, disfranchisement of Mormons in Idaho, federal prosecution, and seeing its leaders incarcerated or hiding on the underground, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, officially, abandoned plural marriage by manifesto of its president and prophet in 1890.

For some members it was not easy to walk away from a theologically revealed doctrine that had contributed to their self-description as a chosen, persecuted, and divinely guided people. For others, it was time for a change. In the theology of the LDS church, though, plural marriage is an eternal principle. Many believers simply ignored the Manifesto, and even church leaders entered into additional relationships or performed new marriages. In 1905, the church reiterated its position that there would be no more sanctioned plural marriages. Now a penalty of excommunication or disfellowshipment could be imposed and was. Confusion swept through the church. The church officially encouraged its members to sustain and obey the law and emphasized the doctrine of continual revelation that made change of this principle possible, but the practical reality of how to discontinue plural marriages created family crises.

Families deeply entrenched in polygamy who believed temple sealings were for eternity found little solace in either divorce or abandonment.³ Refuge in Canada or Mexico were options for some, but changed church policy meant that those were temporary solutions. Realistically, most members allowed polygamy to die an evolutionary death rather than choose to sustain it. The impact on members entangled in this mandated web can only be assessed by studying individual lives. The broad question is what kind of dislocation took place for a people who had been persecuted, hounded, and prosecuted over a religious doctrine when their church announced plural marriage was no longer a valid earthly principle? More telling, hat was the effect on individual families, particularly the wives and children.

Family histories provide tremendous insight into particular cases, showing how some people responded to the dramatic change. Many in the church gradually developed a rationale for plural marriage that evoked an idyllic world where sister wives and their progeny of half-brothers and -sisters lived in harmony under the direction of a kindly patriarch called by God to enter the world of polygamy. In some plural households, harmony did prevail, but in others it is not. There is no generalization that can adequately describe every household and how it reacted. The economic and personal impact of the

abandonment of polygamy was dramatic, but researchers cannot depend on memory or oral history as the most reliable measures of that impact. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's brilliant essay, "Rachel's Death" last year's Arrington lecture, demonstrated how historical records and memory can both corroborate and contradict transmitted family history and memory.⁴ Historically, the responses to the transition from polygamy to monogamy varied. They were personal, tragic, illuminating, uplifting, and devastating. Some individuals and groups refused to make the transition.

In this light, the story told this evening is twofold. First, I will tell the oral tradition and family history version of a particular set of lives that reached maturity during the post-manifesto period of Mormon history. Then the veracity of that story will be analyzed utilizing primary sources such as deeds, court records, LDS ward and mission records, divorce proceedings, and other documents. The subjects of this brief study shared the religiously and culturally Mormon world of the early twentieth century. Some of them stayed close to the faith, some completely left the church, and others, in the words of J. Golden Kimball, "tried to cross the straight and narrow as much as possible." The questions that have guided this study include how do we evaluate the lives of common people? What happens when memory and history do not necessarily edify nor uplift? Should a written biographical record be designed to promote faith? How does an analysis of an individual's personal religious life contribute to religious studies?

A Bear Lake, Idaho winter is legendary for both its length and frigid severity. The term "Bear Laker" in a story usually means a blizzard followed by sub-zero temperatures. The low bottom land along the meandering Bear River is the most frigid place in the 5,900-foot valley. Cattlemen who fed their cattle from horse-drawn sleighs had to chop water holes through the thick Bear River ice every day. One man, Parley Peterson, often spent the winter months alone in a green wooden sheep camp close to his livestock. A small pot-bellied stove heated the tiny wagon and every day other ranchers or his son stopped by to share coffee, biscuits, and flapjacks. On February 26, 1942, Tim Matthews drove his team to the sheep camp to check on Parley. Getting no response from his shouts, he knocked on the door, then entered the sheep camp, and found Parley dead. The grey-haired sixty-five-year-old Bear Lake rancher's heart had stopped.

Parley, raised by polygamous parents, served a mission to Scandinavia, worked hard, married in the temple, had six children, and accumulated land. However in a religious context, his picture-perfect world disintegrated when a number of decisions led to relocation, a divorce, troubled children, strong feelings of disenchantment, and physical separation from his church. He died alone without a home, seemingly sad and lonely. Why is this particular life and that of his divorced wife, Johanna, worthy of close examination? For one thing, people who married in the temple a hundred years ago were not supposed to divorce, so that needs explanation. Further understanding the human behavior of two such individuals can lead to greater understanding of the impact of religion.⁵ Parley and Johanna are my grandparents. For eighty years their extended family and friends have avoided the details of their lives. What happened to this couple who were adored in their final years but whose lives took paths away from the orthodox? Unraveling this mystery is why, in a very personal sense, this path is difficult.

Parley Peterson's life bridged the aforementioned difficult era of Mormon history. Born in 1877, he grew up while his father, Thomas, and his wives were assailed in the courts, in their homes, and in their politics. Parley's story involves two high mountain

valleys in the Great Basin, a rural village in Denmark, and how religion brought them together. It includes an account of love gained and then lost, property acquired and also lost, a family created and dismembered. Anger, jealousy, mistrust, and deception color the events. However, there are also elements of love rekindled, property reclaimed, parts of a family united, and a religion that did not give up on its own. This is a glimpse into the lives of people whose reputations, for good and bad, by memory and oral tradition, are clarified and better understood by a close examination of historical records. Religion, Mormonism, played a crucial role in their tragedies and triumphs.

The story the family recorded and transmitted basically goes as follows. Ovid, Idaho, in Bear Lake County was settled by Danish converts to the LDS church near the end of the American Civil War. Although the altitude is more than 5,900 feet above sea level and the growing season is less than ninety days, Brigham Young dispatched settlers into the foreboding area. For sea-level-raised Danish farmers, it was an environmental shock. Thomas Peterson and his wife Johanna homesteaded north of Ovid and did their best to survive along the foothills. Shortly after arriving in Bear Lake, Thomas married as a plural wife a fifteen-year-old Swedish convert, Kerstine Peterson. Twenty years younger than her husband, Kerstine, or "Casty," had nine children who lived. Eventually, Thomas built a house for Casty next to that of Johanna, or "Aunty." Aunty had one son and raised two stepchildren from a third wife who passed away shortly after marrying Thomas.⁶

In 1900 Parley did as many LDS men did and do, he accepted a church call to the Scandinavian mission. He spent two years in Sweden and Norway and a final year in Denmark. While in Denmark, Parley, as many missionaries before and after, became enthralled with an eighteen-year-old Danish convert, Johanna Marie Thomsen of Bronderslev, a community near the northern tip of the Danish peninsula. This was the same area from which Parley's father, Thomas, had emigrated to the United States forty years earlier.⁷

According to oral accounts, Parley arranged to have his father take care of Johanna and her younger sister, Anna Sena, so they could come to Ovid and await Parley's return. In September, 1903, the young couple traveled to Logan and were married in the Logan Temple. The family grew rapidly, six children in nine years, one of which died, and then a daughter added in 1918. Parley and Johanna purchased land in Ovid, built a dairy and acquired a summer ranch between Ovid and Nounan. During World War I they purchased a home in Montpelier on South Ninth Street (known as Incubator Street because of all the children). They were faithful and devoted to the church and seemed on the verge of economic stability. Then the postwar agricultural depression hit, prices plummeted, and troubles began. Their oldest son, Daniel, was in legal trouble over theft. Parley and Johanna disagreed on how to handle him and tensions developed. Parley's hard work and diverse farming kept him from church, and most important, they had a serious disagreement over whether or not to stay in Idaho.

Family historians write that shady speculators from Salt Lake City persuaded some Utah and Idaho farmers and ranchers to trade their land for more acres in the Mason Valley of Nevada. A proposed water project on the Walker River, which sliced through Lyon County east of Carson City, would make irrigated land available. The growing season at 4,300 feet in western Nevada would be much longer; the rainfall would be considerably less, yet the snow-packed eastern slope of the Sierras created greater

opportunity for irrigation. All of their land in Bear Lake was dry-farm land.⁸ Parley wanted to take the plunge and start a new adventure. The water was not there yet, the valley held an Indian reservation, and there were many uncertainties about land ownership. Johanna fought hard to emphasize the dangers. She had a new home in a town where the schools and shopping were within easy walking distances. Although the current financial struggles were major, the family grew its own meat, chickens, and vegetables and had plenty of milk. They were basically self-sufficient and making progress. Parley argued for the virtues of pioneering, a change of scenery for their oldest son, and the potential of more land to leave his sons. Johanna worried about the distance from their family and the lack of community.

Parley, known for his stubbornness, won. The family made the land trade, loaded their belongings, livestock, and equipment in cattle cars at Montpelier and in early 1921, left Bear Lake Valley for Mason Valley. Some of the children rode with the horses and cattle in order to water and feed them throughout the six-hundred mile journey. They settled north of Yerington, the county seat, near the tiny hamlet of Wabuska. Since there was no LDS church, they stopped going and church was no longer a part of their lives.

From day one in Nevada, the venture was disastrous. Danny ended up in a Nevada Reform School. There was no church and the family began to argue and live apart. The water project was incomplete, the school was lousy, and Parley and Johanna argued themselves into a stony silence. Mason Valley was high desert, and without rain or irrigation water, the venture was doomed to failure. From this point the story becomes quite murky, and because of generational silence relative to sensitive issues, like divorce, the events were less discussed and recorded. Some of the whispered innuendos and rumors, especially among Parley's relatives in Ovid, talked about the Petersons' oldest daughter getting involved with a married man, the school teacher cheating one son out of his pay, and Johanna "stepping out" on Parley. Parley lost his land, they divorced, and he abandoned his family and returned to Idaho to reclaim some semblance of his earlier life.

The next year, Parley's brother, John, went to Nevada to check on three homesick sons, one age twelve and a set of twins age ten, and he convinced Johanna that he should take them home to see their dad. They did not see their mother again for thirteen years. Johanna left Wabuska and with her daughters moved from Reno to Lake Tahoe to Carson City and other spots, working at every imaginable job to care for her family. The LDS church did not play a role in the family's lives in Nevada or in Idaho. After the divorce, bitterness festered, and the family unit disintegrated. In the words of the Russian poet Mayakovsky, "Their boat of love crashed on the rocks of every day life."⁹

In the meantime, Parley regained some land along the Bear River in the bottoms. He lived out his days as a lonely man herding a few sheep and owning some beef cattle. Although there was a home on the ranch, he lived in a sheep camp or with his married son. Johanna returned to Idaho in 1935 to see her first grandchild and was taken down to the ranch to see Parley. She cried uncontrollably over the way he lived and how much he had aged. In February of 1942, Parley died of a heart attack at age 65 in the sheep camp on the remnant of his Bear Lake land. Johanna remarried in 1943 and lived another fifteen years in Nevada before she and her husband moved to Bonners Ferry, Idaho, where she died in 1972.

A common religious belief helped bring Parley and Johanna together. In the eyes of many, religion could not sustain them as they chose separate ways. Their choices had

consequences that affected their lives and those of their children. In the opinions of so many of their old friends and dear relatives, they led very sad and disappointing lives from both personal and religious standpoints. In a culture where no success compensates for failure in the home, they did not fare well. However, there are other aspects of this story that deserve to be told. Memory and oral history are not always substantiated by historical documents. Perception established by time and retelling is often stronger than reality.

What do the Bear Lake County tax, probate, census, and land records reveal? What do the LDS church records from Ovid, Montpelier, and the California mission add? Is there any information in the Lyon County or Nevada State court, land, and tax records to indicate what the Parley and Johanna Peterson family did there? Through examining all of these records, conducting interviews, and examining letters, the story becomes much different and more complete.

When Johanna Marie Thomsen and her sister arrived in Ovid, Idaho, after a sea journey and a transcontinental railroad trip which brought them to the Montpelier, Idaho, train station five miles away from Ovid, she found a less than idyllic setting. Thomas Peterson was nearing death, and Aunty and Casty struggled continually over who should care for their dying husband. Casty's children did all of the farm work, and Johanna and Sena alternated living with each wife. At times Johannafelt totally isolated because her English language skills were minuscule and the Petersons spoke English around her. The two wives, separated by nearly two decades of age disagreed on the proper medical treatment for Thomas. Aunty did not like the doctor's prescriptions of beer and other pain killers. She felt that the priesthood should be the source of healing power and on more than one occasion dumped the bucket of beer and threw away the drugs. Johanna often rode with one of Casty's children to Montpelier and picked up the supplies at the Fair Store, a Jewish-owned establishment. She recalled delivering the beer to Aunty's house where Thomas was and seeing Aunty pour it out and denounce in Danish everyone involved.¹⁰

The impact of living in an uncomfortable situation, seeing the Petersons less than totally committed to the LDS Church, not sure what to think of plural marriage, and comparing this life to that in her native land caused Johanna to doubt her decision to come to the United States and to consider marrying Parley. By the time Parley came back in the late spring of 1903, Johanna decided she needed time and space. She detested the way they lived. Johanna loved cleanliness and order. She enjoyed nice dinners, a formal table, and manners. The Petersons of Ovid were not orderly nor especially clean. However, the Petersons had taken her in, and when she and Parley informed Thomas of their decision to postpone the wedding, he told them in no uncertain terms, they were to marry in the temple.¹¹

Thomas died on September 3, 1903, and twenty days later, Parley, Johanna, and a few of their friends drove wagons from Bear Lake through Preston, Idaho, to Logan, Utah, to be married in the Temple. The trip lasted over two days. According to Johanna "I cried all the way and no one cared. I have never felt so lonely in my life." She understood almost nothing during the endowment and ceremony and cried all the way back to Ovid.¹² Her thirteen-year-old sister, Sena, wanted to live with them in their small house, but Parley refused.

During the next eighteen years, the couple worked very hard to accumulate land,

animals, children, and some status. The status was not in the church. In examining the Ovid and Montpelier Second Ward records between 1903 and 1921, it is difficult to document that they attended church much at all. The children were blessed and baptized, not by their father, and in the carefully recorded minutes of speakers, testimonies, or prayers, their names do not appear. In examining the ward clerk notations of who held positions and attended priesthood meeting or Relief Society, their names are not recorded. Parley had a reputation as a very spiritual man with great faith. Tithing records are not available for examination, but according to Johanna they “never returned to the temple.” This was not unusual because of distance. At a time when few men attended services and there was less emphasis on manifested belief, it is difficult on the surface to assess the strength of their convictions.¹³ However, it is possible to document their property and transactions.

Parley Peterson began acquiring land of his own as a consequence of his father’s death, Thomas’s first wife’s death, and his gradual buying out his siblings. When Thomas died in 1903, he left each wife eighty acres. Since Johanna had no living children, the land was farmed by Parley and his brothers.¹⁴ All of them, but one, tried to farm. When their dad’s first wife died in 1912, the living eight children divided her eighty acres, but five of them bought out the other three. They knew how hard it was for their father to support multiple wives and children on a quarter of a section. Parley then acquired other land, most noticeably approximately 220 acres in the bottom land between Ovid and Montpelier.¹⁵ The deed book indicates that in acquiring these pieces of property, he always paid cash. All of the transactions are listed as sold to Parley and Johanna M. Peterson. There is no indication that he owned land north of Ovid in Nounan, which meant he probably leased the land he held there from someone and did not actually own it.¹⁶

In 1916 on March 24, Parley purchased a quarter section from his brother John T. and did it only in his name. Johanna was not one of the signators when the land changed hands.¹⁷ Again, on March 30, 1918, Parley acquired a home in Montpelier for fifteen hundred dollars and did it in his name only. Why is there a change in the patterns of purchase? Earlier, they had always bought property together, which meant the land was in both names. Two years later, Parley purchased 320 acres from his brothers Thomas and Joseph and their wives on March 12, 1920. He bought them out for twelve hundred dollars.¹⁸ This transaction was actually a quitclaim deed and involved the long-owned bottom lands on the Bear River. Then on January 8, 1921, he purchased two more Montpelier lots in Montpelier for four hundred dollars from a couple in Rock Springs, Wyoming.¹⁹ Once again, Johanna’s name was not included in either of these transactions.

The family moved to Montpelier the year the youngest child, Bernice, was born, 1918, and committed to the land. They attained self-sufficiency by having a garden, chickens, and milk cows; these plus sheep, swine, or beef provided all the food necessary for a family of eight. In the memories of the children, the time in Montpelier was great except when their oldest brother absconded with their savings. They delivered milk and eggs door to door with a wagon in the summer and on a sleigh in the winter.

What is apparent though is that their home always contained a tense atmosphere of stubbornness, argument, and silence. The siblings recalled battles over the older children’s behavior and disagreements over communal punishment. After one of their sons, Raymond, was baptized in 1919, he and his cousin Leslie, who was baptized near

the same time, decided to use their new-found ecclesiastical knowledge on behalf of a pen of young pigs. Each pig was immersed in a watering trough with an appropriate verbal prayer. Many of the other children witnessed the scene as well as the punishment that followed. According to Raymond, Leslie's dad, John T., in the midst of the willow spanking, condemned them to purgatory for sacrilege. Since John T. was in the Ovid bishopric, later the bishop and a county commissioner, his proclamation was taken so seriously that "Leslie prayed he'd die and he did."²⁰ Actually Leslie died four years later of typhoid fever after Raymond had returned from Nevada.²¹ Johanna resented a relative whipping her son.

Danny's escapades can be documented in the court records, but Parley's desire to go to Nevada was also based on acquiring more land in a better climate so he could do better financially. Apparently Johanna solicited help from his brothers, mother, and anyone else to convince him to stay. She finally had a nice home, in a town where she could have the pretty things that she desired. Her daughters could enjoy a life away from dry and dirty farmsteads. Just as her world was improving, he wanted to start over. Why he made such a move is unclear, but the records do not reveal a swindle or loss of land.²² That is significant because the land exchange and being cheated through it has always been used by the family as a reason for the divorce.

The county deed books in Bear Lake do not show a transfer of ownership of the property along the Bear River. He did sell the house in Montpelier. Whether he leased his other land as well as property in Ovid to family members is unclear, but he did not leave without a safety net of sorts. By the same token, the Lyon County, Nevada records do not document a land purchase in or near Wabuska. There is no recorded transaction in Nevada between 1920 and 1923 that involves Parley Peterson.²³

Between 1916 and early 1921, Parley purchased 480 acres, two lots, and a home in Idaho. The high agricultural prices of World War I probably helped him, but the postwar recession did not slow him down. Although the family seemed on the verge of security, they sold their home in Montpelier in October, 1921, and made the ill-fated move to Nevada. They sold the home for \$2,300, a increase of \$800 from the price paid in 1918.²⁴ Joseph Lockman of Montpelier purchased the home.

Once again, the family's oral tradition relative to the experience in Nevada is historically thin. Ironically, Lyon County is now Nevada's leading agricultural county. One-fourth of all agricultural products in the state are grown in the valleys around Yerrington. Some people who went down with them stayed longer and did quite well. Although blame is placed on land swindlers, the reality is that the family's internal relationships had deteriorated to the point that the move hastened and to a degree made easier a formal separation. Johanna may have stepped out on Parley; he may have had violent relationships with Johanna, Danny, and Ila; but the Nevada records show some concrete events.

Court records indicate that Parley and Johanna leased a home and farm land three miles south of Wabuska. By moving to Nevada in October, they could not expect an income for at least a year. They spent most of the money made from the sale of their home on the moving costs. According to Johanna, Parley was a jealous man with a rather harsh temper. They disagreed over everything, primarily Danny, Ila, the farm, and religion. During the winter Parley threatened the Yerrington businessman for pursuing Ila.

By June 3, 1922, only eight months after selling the home in Montpelier, Johanna

and Parley entered into an agreement in Yerington, Nevada, where for a sum of ten dollars, he yielded to her half interest in all of the ranch property in Idaho, 320 acres held along the Bear River. Nothing is said or noted about the other lots he purchased or other parcels of land he owned. The main farm was split by mutual consent in Lyon County, Nevada. There is no indication in the Nevada court records of why a decision was made to formally split the property while they lived in Nevada. In reality, their life together was in the process of ending by June, 1922.²⁵

In a major confrontation later in June, Parley tried to force Johanna out of their rented home. Cleanliness, order, and the Nevada decision were issues, but now he made other charges. A month later in July, he accused her of infidelity, threatened her, and demanded she leave the home. She stated that he was very angry with her “for some reason or other; he was terribly angry. He told me he did not care for me anymore.” Parley demanded that she get out of the home and take the children with her. She said, “I didn’t want to leave the house, but he compelled me to.”²⁶ She took four of the children and walked three miles into Wabuska. (One son stayed with Parley.) Fearing his anger and temper, she stayed in town, got a job as a cook for a hay crew, and never returned to their home.²⁷ When Parley came to visit the children, he refused to talk about a reconciliation. Indeed, Johanna offered to return, fix up the place, and take care of the children. Parley refused her offer. Shortly after, Parley, his brother John T., and his brother-in-law James Johnson came to Johanna and demanded all of the children be allowed to accompany their uncles back to Bear Lake. They took the twins along with the son who had stayed with Parley and sent them to Idaho. Ila, age fourteen, refused to go. Johanna later expressed fear as the main reason she allowed her sons to leave.²⁸ Johanna protested vehemently but to no avail. Later, in November 1922, Parley left Nevada for good. He had fulfilled his agreement of a one-year lease and so moved back to Idaho. The family story has the uncles going to Nevada to get the boys after Parley had left. It actually happened before.

Johanna remained in Wabuska with her two daughters, working at a restaurant as a waitress and then as a cook. She also managed a small two-bedroom boarding house, but said that “very seldom anyone comes and stays.” In the meantime, Parley returned to his Idaho acreage and began to farm again. He was only in Nevada thirteen months. His three sons never really lived with him in Idaho on a consistent basis but were placed in various relatives’ homes in the Ovid area.²⁹

The next year, 1923, Danny got out of juvenile detention, so Johanna packed up her daughters and Danny and left for Idaho. There is no record of correspondence during the year or of why she came back other than to see her children and deliver her problem son, but perhaps Johanna hoped for some kind of reconciliation. She approached Parley in Ovid, and suggested “he get a house and provide a home and I would stay and take care of the children, but he didn’t.”³⁰ Parley responded that he did not want her there. She said, “There was nothing for me to do . . . he, Parley said he could look after the children very well without my assistance.”³¹ The family environment in Ovid was very hostile toward Johanna because rumors circulated about her disloyalty and unfaithfulness. Her relatives by marriage were especially judgmental, and she quickly realized that any thought of putting her family back together had to be abandoned. Johanna took Ila and Bernice and returned to Wabuska. Her trip to Idaho lasted two weeks. Danny remained in Idaho, and Johanna would not see Parley or her sons for another twelve years. It is

important to reiterate that the LDS Church was not a major player in their lives.³²

Upon her return to Wabuska, Johanna continued her life as a waitress and cook. She and her daughters struggled financially, and Ila chose, at age seventeen, to marry and alleviate some of the pressure on her mother. Meanwhile, in Idaho, the three younger sons went to church enough to receive the Aaronic Priesthood, but they worked on other farms and rarely lived with their father. Parley sent Johanna money on at least three occasions, but never more than thirty dollars.³³

Finally, in the early spring of 1925, Johanna began divorce proceedings in Lyon County, Nevada. The first thing she did was record the document that gave her half ownership of the Idaho property. Then, in March, she began the process of legally notifying Parley of the charges of desertion. Parley never responded to any of the material requested by the Nevada court or her attorney.³⁴ A formal summons was issued in May for a court date on August 10, 1925. After hearing Johanna and her attorney, Frank Langan, review the entire history of the family's Nevada experience, the judge granted the divorce and custody of the two daughters; even though Ila had married, she was still considered a minor. The judge cited desertion and failure to provide as the reasons for his decision. There was no mention of the Idaho property, her sons, or any other issues. Fundamentally, Johanna needed to move on and Parley had no interest in moving on together.³⁵

In June, 1926, Parley paid Johanna \$2,950 for her half interest in their farmland. There is no evidence of correspondence or legal communication. The deed book simply shows that Parley bought her out ten months after the divorce.³⁶ None of the other property is considered in a financial settlement.

A marriage for time and eternity had ended, at least the time part, but what has this got to do with religion and Mormon history? How does the tragic story of an obscure Idaho farm couple contribute to a discussion of religious history? Were once-held convictions abandoned through the conduct of life or were they merely set aside?

In reality, this brief vignette illuminates much about the early twentieth century and the Mormon West. Indeed, by contemporary standards, there was not a high percentage of church attendance or temple activity. There were not intense periodic interviews for worthiness, and the residue of plural marriage created confusion and doubt. Most of Parley's and Johanna's children had no relationship with the church that brought their parents together. Four of the six remained totally outside of the church. Two of the boys, probably because of the Bear Lake Mormon women they married, gravitated toward the church later in their lives. It is noteworthy, though, that parts of their religion ran deep and lasting through the lives of both of the divorced parents .

While Johanna lived in Reno and operated a boarding house, she often served lunch or dinner to the LDS missionaries. These included some Bear Lake natives who found themselves in Reno. In fact, she kept track of her children through the missionaries, including the brother of her daughter-in-law.³⁷ In early 1935 she decided to come back to Bear Lake for a visit to see her first grandchild. It is on this trip that Johanna's son took her down to the ranch to see her former husband. She did weep as she saw how he lived in a sheep camp and was amazed at how he had aged. At that time, he was 58 and she 51. He was cordial but quiet and somewhat withdrawn.³⁸ They never talked again. Johanna kept her contacts through missionaries up until the time she remarried.

Although he lived frugally, Parley was not a poor man by any means. Throughout the 1920s and '30s, he quietly accumulated more property and either listed himself as single or, on one occasion, a "widower." By 1940, he owned over one thousand acres and several lots.³⁹ Ever since his days as a missionary in Denmark, some people claimed that he had a religious gift—a gift of healing. One entire family that was converted in Denmark remained fiercely loyal to Parley. They often called him to bless the sick because they could not afford a doctor.

One incident in the summer of 1935 indicates both faith and trust. His oldest grandchild, a boy, had contracted spinal meningitis after a rather severe case of pneumonia. His son and daughter-in-law were expecting their second child, and the doctors and nurses prepared them for the loss of their son. The young couple sent for the grandfathers to come and bless the baby. One grandfather was very active and in a bishopric, the other, a divorced shepherd who rarely graced the doorway of the church was Parley Peterson. The mother asked Parley to give the prayer. According to witnesses who recorded the event, "I have never heard a prayer like that in my life. He pleaded with God in such a way that he willed life back into that baby. He prayed until we all knew the boy would be okay."⁴⁰ Another simply said "it was one of the most powerful prayers they ever heard."⁴¹ Who was this man? At times, he lived with his children and is remembered as a kind and gracious gentleman. Yet his religious commitment seemed hard to measure.

In trying to determine the veracity of allegations that Johanna cheated on Parley, a commonly held belief in Bear Lake Valley, her own recollections at various times may illuminate a very touchy emotional issue. According to Eulala Peterson, the sister of a daughter-in-law, Johanna explained to them in May or 1942, that "she flirted with those men in order to get Parley's land back."⁴² This version was repeated twenty years later during a lengthy car ride with a grandson and his wife.⁴³ In both cases she claimed innocence of any infidelity but came close to admitting some type of less than appropriate association. If the flirtations involved Ila, her daughter, that is unknown. The Bear Lake rumors attacked both mother and daughter. What is clear is that Parley believed the worst and decided to return to Idaho and try to reclaim his property and reputation.

Only thirty-eight when divorced, Johanna did not remarry until after Parley's death in 1942. She lived in Nevada as a single woman for twenty years. Was there a faint memory of LDS concern about an eternal vow? It is intriguing, but unclear. Her new husband, George Keith, a retired railroader, who loved the Milwaukee Braves, did not like Mormons, and it was only in her last decade of life, after George died, that she found her way back to church in Bonners Ferry, Idaho.⁴⁴ Johanna and Parley never applied for a temple divorce, and this led Johanna to return to the temple in the late 1960s when she was in her eighties. In many respects, she remains an enigma. Johanna according to her family, never had contact with her parents after she left Denmark. Although they joined the LDS church and remained active throughout their lives, she completely lost contact with them. Her relationship with her younger sister, who married Parley's brother, was always strained.⁴⁵ She maintained an active and personal correspondence with her daughter-in-law in Idaho, became closer to grandchildren later in life, yet never got too close. Her house was always immaculate and orderly. Her style was proper etiquette and manners. When her son Raymond took his family to Nevada to meet her in May, 1942, after Parley died, they stopped outside of town and cleaned up the four children and themselves before they entered her home. She greeted her son with the words, "You told

me you'd come back."⁴⁶ This may have referred to his departure with his uncles twenty years earlier and is a glimpse into the pain they both felt.

During this research, the realization hit that I would not discover why my grandparents did what they did. The transcript of the divorce hearing shed light on Johanna's version of the dissolution of the marriage. Jealousy, anger, mistrust, and frustration led to desertion and failure to provide. Their decision to step away from their religion prior to the divorce is unanswerable. At one point, thirty-five years ago, Johanna told me that they both despised polygamy because of the inherent unfairness toward women, especially young girls. They are only one example of the post-manifesto experience. Parley's side of the story is unrecorded but not untold. His earlier version obviously created an atmosphere that devastated Johanna. At times, I felt that he set her up because of the land acquisition in his name only, the stories of land trades, and the manner in which the marriage ended. On the other hand, she may have driven him to throw her out because of her actions. Those who knew Parley later in life admired his honesty and love for his grandchildren. I do not need to know why. I only try to understand.

This couple and their story illustrate a humbling, intriguing, and ironic reality of Mormon culture. It is hard to measure the impact of a changing theology on individual members. They chose to live outside the umbrella of the church. Others that went to Nevada about the same time banded together and formed a branch. The LDS Church preaches and teaches that their people are peculiar, they have to live by a higher standard of measured participation, worthiness to enter the temple, perform priesthood ordinances, and hold positions is based on paying a tithe, living the word of wisdom, believing the Book of Mormon, remaining chaste, and sustaining called leaders. Parley Peterson's priesthood blessings of seven decades ago would be scrutinized more today. Consequently, those found worthy are considered part of a special chosen people and judged to be an exclusive elect. However, theologically the religion is eternally inclusive. Although everyone will be judged on how well they live their lives and baptized Mormons are held to a higher standard, the LDS Church casts an all encompassing net that gathers everyone into some degree of eternal glory. The temples, like Logan, where Parley and Johanna recited their vows a century ago, also provide vicarious work for any and all who have died. The LDS Church created an inclusive theology and an ecclesiastical eternal welfare system that embarrasses the social and economic ideas of both Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt. This discussion of Parley and Johanna is about earthly lives, though, not eternal judgment. Does anger, desertion, divorce, ideology, and lack of church participation translate into wasted lives? Are the lives of the children criteria for judging the parents? Mormons have become much less willing to judge in the long run, especially the very long run.

Perhaps I will return to what I told Leonard Arrington about doing Mormon history, "No sir." And always remember that Obert Tanner's counsel was "It will be tough." I abide by Thomas Jefferson's counsel: "We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left here to combat it." Better, yet, Thomas Jefferson also reminded us "that speeches measured by the hour die by the hour."

Many individuals assisted in the research and writing of this essay. Michael L. Nicholls persuaded me to write fearlessly about a troubling aspect of my family history. Leonard N. Rosenband listened as my ideas unfolded. My brothers and sister tolerated my probing and uncomfortable questions about their memories. Ryan Melter, Zach Jones, Jackie Peterson, and Mariann Yeoman helped with various parts of the research. Robert Parson, Utah State University Archivist is my partner on the Arrington Lecture Committee and often in research. Glenda Nesbit prepared the manuscript quickly and accurately. My wife, Kay, shared my passion for the project and her counsel is wise.

1. Obert C. Tanner, *One Man's Journey: In Search of Freedom* (Salt Lake City: Humanities Center, University of Utah, 1994); Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventure of a Church Historian* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1998); Annie Clark Tanner, *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1969). See also, Obert C. Tanner, *One Man's Search: Addresses* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989).
2. Leonard J. Arrington, *Utah's Audacious Stockman: Charles Redd* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1995). Annie Clark Tanner, *A Mormon Mother*. Redd choose to operate independently and Annie Clark Tanner epitomized the trauma of being abandoned economically and ignored personally.
3. Jessie L. Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987); Richard S. Van Wagonen, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986); Carron B. Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997) and *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994); See also Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890-1900," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring 1985); Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in 19th Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
4. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Rachel's Death*, Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture 9, October 2003 (Logan, Utah: Special Collections & Archives, Utah State University, 2004). Ulrich describes how memory and history do not always correlate as the truth. This essay on her grandmother's tragic death is really the inspiration for this essay.
5. Harold Bloom. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). Levi S. Peterson, *Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996). The writing of biography is expanding within a Mormon context. The David and Beatrice Evans Biography Award and the workshop by the same title have encouraged the writing of biography and family history.
6. Zora Poulsen Peterson, "Thomas C. Peterson." *A History of Bear Lake Pioneers*, ed. F. Ross Peterson, Dorothy Matthews, Edith Haddock (Salt Lake City: Utah Printers, 1968). This is a large volume that includes over 250 brief biographies. See also Russell

Rich, *Land of the Sky Blue Water, A History of LDS Settlement in Bear Lake County* (Montpelier, Idaho: Bear Lake Publishing, 2003). A. McKay Rich, *The History of Montpelier, Idaho, 1864–1925* (Montpelier, Idaho: Bear Lake Publishing, 2003).

7. Zora Poulsen Peterson, “Raymond and Zora Peterson,” written about 1969, manuscript in author’s possession. The following individuals contributed in some way to the family history: Royal Peterson, Raymond Peterson, Eulala Peterson, Lois Lee Hulme, Dixie Miller Peterson, Lathair Peterson, Karl R. Peterson, Johanna T. Keith, Donna Lee Nickolaisen, Max Peterson, and Deloy Sorensen.

8. This narrative is summarized from a variety of accounts gathered by the author. Raymond and Royal Peterson, two of the sons both remembered certain aspects of the intrigue surrounding Parley’s desire to go to Nevada. They both listed the behavior of their oldest brother, the promise of more land, and a new beginning. These stories are augmented by their children, and other family members. The relatives in Ovid all repeated the idea of the land exchange and the desire to farm more land.

9. Most of the reminiscences relative to the events in Nevada and subsequent lives comes from children and grandchildren. Zora Poulsen Peterson wrote her version of the events and described the events in Nevada as foolish and devastating. The sons recall only the difficulties, poor schools, and how tough it was compared to Montpelier. Their daughter Ila was more willing to discuss the conflicts and refused to travel with her mother to Idaho until after Parley’s death.

10. Johanna T. Keith, interview with author, February 1966, in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. She also discussed some of these feelings in letters to a granddaughter, Donna Lee Nicholaisen, letters in Donna Lee’s possession. To her family, she spent the last years of her life trying to explain her reasons for what she did.

11. Ibid. This discussion was also held with other grandchildren. Dixie Lee Miller, who became very close to her grandmother, after Johanna moved to Bonner’s Ferry, heard similar versions.

12. Ibid. This story was repeated many times throughout her visits. Whether or not they talked about the temple is unknown. Parley and Johanna, like many couples of that time, never returned to the temple. That is partly due to lack of proximity and difficult geography and not faithlessness. However, the ceremony of 1903, in a foreign language, left a lasting impression on Johanna.

13. Ovid Ward Records, Montpelier second Ward Records, and California Mission records, LDS Archives, Division of Church History, Salt Lake City, Utah. The ward records indicate a list of all births, deaths, blessings, ordinations, callings, and releases. The minutes of each ward contain a brief description of each meeting including speakers, prayers, and sacrament participants. The attendance record at Priesthood meeting, then a weekday meeting, often reports “canceled for no attendance.” In an agrarian world where nearly every family milked cows, a weekday evening meeting was difficult to attend. Johanna never is listed as an attendee on the Relief Society roles either. Their home in Ovid was a few miles from the church and in Montpelier it was four blocks away.

14. Deed Book, Bear Lake County, Probate Court, May 15, 1915. The estate of Thomas C. Peterson and Hannah Peterson. Parley and his brother, Thomas, were the executors of the will.

15. Deed Book, Warranty Deed No. 19, p. 62, February 17, 1912. The description of the land.

16. Parley and his brothers probably leased some land north of Ovid and Bern toward the Nounan Valley. There is no indication they ever owned property there. Taxes were not paid nor does the deed book record a transaction.
17. Deed Book, Bear Lake County, March 24, 1916.
18. Ibid, March 2, 1918. He purchased this home in Montpelier from William and Anna Jonaly.
19. Ibid, January 8, 1921. These lots were purchased from John and Margaret Boyer.
20. Oral interview with Raymond P. Peterson, interview by Mary Kay Peterson, February 27, 1976. He told versions of this story throughout his life. Henry's sister, Venita, also told many people about the baptism and the subsequent thrashing. Raymond was baptized in 1919.
21. Leslie passed away September 5, 1923. News Examiner, Montpelier, Idaho. His sister Martha died two weeks later of the same disease.
22. Transcript, Dixie Peterson, Miller, daughter of Royal Peterson, in possession of author. Zora Peterson, a daughter-in-law, repeated this story often. It is probable that family members looked for another reason for the divorce.
23. Marian Yeoman of Dayton, Nevada searched the Lyon County records in my behalf. The only land records that list the names of Parley and Johanna are about Bear Lake up until the divorce.
24. Deed Book, Bear Lake County, October 1, 1921.
25. This transaction appears in both the Lyon County, Nevada and Bear Lake County records, June 3, 1922. Parley deeded to Johanna half the main ranch. The other properties were not included.
26. Johanna Peterson vs. Parley O. Peterson, District Court of the Eighth Judicial District, Lyon County, Nevada. Transcript. Lyon County records, August 12, 1925, p.5.
27. Ibid. p. 6. None of the children ever talked about this particular traumatic event. Raymond stayed with his father. The twins, Royal and Roland, Ila, and Bernice went with their mother.
28. Ibid. p.8.
29. Raymond lived with his dad's sister Selma and her husband, George. Roland and Royal lived with Parley's brother John T. and his wife, Johanna, who had lost six children and constantly mourned over them. She resented the twins being there and being alive. They slept in an attic and _____. In all three cases, the boys felt mistreated. Raymond left two years later at age 14 and worked on ranches.
30. Peterson vs. Peterson, pp. 9-10. Johanna never told the court that Danny was in reform school. She said when asked why she went to Idaho, she said, "Well, the oldest boy was ___ I took him up there."
31. Ibid. p.10.
32. The judge asked Johanna under what rites were they married. She stated, "Mormon."
33. Ibid.
34. Beginning in February, 1925, notice was sent to Parley that divorce proceedings would begin. He never replied, nor did an attorney. Lyon County records, Yerington, Nevada.
35. Peterson v. Peterson, p.15.
36. Bear Lake County, Deed Book, June 12, 1926.

37. Perth Poulsen, interview with author, February 11, 2004. Perth and his brother, Rex, both served in the California Mission during the 1930's and Perth was in Reno nearly six months. He stated that it was a long standing invitation to missionaries to eat with Mrs. Johanna Peterson.
38. Zora Poulsen Peterson, "History of Raymond and Zora Peterson," typescript in possession of author. Danny, Ila, Bernice, and Roland all remarried outside the church. Bernice was never baptized. Raymond and Royal both became more involved much later in life.
39. The Bear Lake deed books show the purchase of acreage in 1928, 62 acres for six hundred dollars. Other land or lots was acquired in 1933, 1937, 1938, and 1939.
40. Eulala Poulsen Peterson, interview with author, February 8, 2004, see also the Zora Peterson manuscript. Deloy Sorensen of Ovid, whose parents were converted in Denmark by Parley, also reported the same. Lois Lee Budge Hulme, the granddaughter of one of Thomas C. Peterson's stepchildren also reports similar events.
41. Ibid.
42. Eula P. Peterson interview, also Zora P. Peterson, her sister reported the same.
43. Max and Karen Peterson, interview with author, February 2004. Donna Lee Nickolaisen kept an active correspondence with Johanna up until her death and she always, as she did to the divorce court, claimed the stories were false.
44. Dixie Peterson Miller, transcript. Dixie, Royals' daughter, stayed with Johanna while working in Bonner's Ferry and also remained very close.
45. All of the written and oral sources maintain that Johanna's pride kept her from staying in contact with active LDS people.
46. Zora Peterson manuscript. Interviews with Eulala Peterson and Donna Lee Nickolaisen. When his son Raymond executed the will of his father, he sold all of Parley's property and divided the proceeds equally among his five siblings and his mother. He then bought back part of the land. Parley had \$2,593.62 in First Security Bank listed as his personal property. His personal property consisted (CUTS OFF)