



A CLOSE-UP OF POLYGAMY

BY JUANITA BROOKS

I ONCE overheard a conversation in which a girl from the East told of her acquaintance with a young man from a Mormon polygamous family. Her attitude expressed what appears to be a popular belief. She marvelled at the young man's size, because, she said, "I had always had an idea that in those big families the stock ran out, or something, and the children were under-sized and—you know—anemic. But he certainly wasn't, and he was one of twenty-eight, the youngest son of the third wife."

I smiled as I thought of my father, also the youngest son of a third wife, also over six feet tall and, as a young man, perfectly proportioned. His brothers and sisters numbered forty-seven instead of twenty-eight, however, and every one of them was average or above in size, without a single deformity in the group. My mother was the second child of the second wife, and her nineteen brothers and sisters were not only physically sound but were intellectually superior—at least they produced a surprising number of school-teachers and professional men.

To one like myself, brought up in a Mormon community, there is nothing startling or difficult to understand in the children of polygamous families. What is difficult to understand has to do with their fathers and mothers. Some day someone may make a careful, scientific study of the psychology of polygamy; I can only write from observation and from discussions I have

had with people who lived it. And I confess that I'm still very much puzzled about many things.

My own parents, both the result of polygamous unions, have different attitudes toward it. My mother harbors a feeling of bitterness toward her father, not because he had more than one wife, but because she feels that he did not treat them fairly. My father, on the other hand, speaks with the greatest reverence of his parents and accepts all the other four wives and their children equally. Probably the best way to get behind these attitudes in my parents will be to analyze both cases rather fully. There is nothing more unusual or spectacular about them than about many other cases. In fact, I consider them rather typical of two common phases of the practice of polygamy.

Mother's father, Grandpa H., had four wives. He was a sturdy German, a good financier, thrifty and industrious. In his youth he married a splendid girl, but one who was proud and aristocratic. She brought with her some property which he, with rare economic good sense, invested wisely in a country store and some cattle. The young couple soon became prosperous, bought more and more farm land, held mortgages on several homes, and enlarged their store.

About this time the principle of polygamy was being preached as a means whereby a man might inherit

a higher degree of glory in the next life. Grandpa H. was prominent in church work and so was urged to live the principle. I have no way of knowing of course how much his personal desires entered into it. With Grandma's attitude I am more familiar, as she lived at my home several months last winter, and I used to ask her about it as she sat braiding rugs or mending my family's stockings.

When Grandpa H. first courted her for his second wife she refused him in order to become the second wife of a neighbor.

"Why did you marry a man with a wife anyway?" I asked her one day. "Weren't there young men enough to go round?"

"Oh, there were plenty of single men," she answered. "I don't know why, only I liked some of the others better. I went with some of the single ones, but they were so gawky."

"But why didn't you take Grandpa in the first place then?"

"Oh, I liked George a lot better, and, besides, Suzette and Mary were so different." (Suzette was Grandpa H.'s first wife; Mary was George's.)

Then, in her quaint way, she told how both men were paying her some attention at the same time. One incident seemed always to amuse her. Grandpa H. came to call on her one evening and soon after he was established in the family parlor Suzette arrived. He acted a little taken back when she came in, but she explained that the children were asleep and she was so lonesome at home that she thought she'd run over and chat awhile too. After a short visit she said, "Well, John, let's go home." He paid no attention to the comment. After a few minutes she repeated it. He acted a little nettled and answered, "You go ahead; I'll be along in a few minutes," at which she jumped up and hurried out, slamming both the door and the

gate after her. Grandma chuckled as she told this.

"And did you refuse him just on that account?"

"Oh, no, I'd likely have refused him anyway, but that made it easier. I decided I'd never go into a family where the wife felt that way about it."

Then she told of the courtship of the man she married first. He was a neighbor who was friendly with the family. He would stop in every day on his way to or from work to chat a while. When he first began paying attentions to Grandma it was to bring her home from the dances along with Mary, his wife. Sometimes at intermission the three would go across the street to his home for cake and sweet wine.

"His wife was in favor of it," Grandma explained. "She was always friendly. She helped me make my wedding dress. It was white lawn with a little blue flower—real pretty. Then Mary gave me a petticoat to wear with it, all embroidered by hand and with a lot of pin-tucks. We even put up the grub box for the trip together."

In order to be married "right" they went to the Endowment house at Salt Lake City, a ten-day trip. When they left Mary kissed them both and wished them luck.

But the happiness was destined to be short-lived, for the very day after their return home George was killed in a runaway. He had taken both wives and the three youngest children to the field to look over the crops and on the way home the team became so frightened that he lost control of them.

So Grandma was left a widow at nineteen. Now to be a widow in the Mormon Church is a distinct disadvantage. Having been "sealed" to her first husband, she is his for eternity whether she remarries or not. This cannot be changed, for "you cannot rob the dead"—unless in some way the husband is shown to have been un-

worthy. Her children also, should she remarry, belong to the first husband. Eternity was very real to these people; it was a continuation of the normal activities of life under improved conditions, like walking from a poorly furnished, dim cabin room into a beautiful, carpeted, lighted, modern apartment. Death carried no fear because it was only a temporary separation; the only union fit to be called a marriage was one in which the relationship was to be continued throughout eternity. For this reason there was something rather heroic about a man who would take another man's wife, support her, and permit her to bear children who at death would belong to the first husband. Men naturally preferred to rear children who would belong to them in the next world, because part of a man's standing in the kingdom was determined by the number and quality of his posterity. Bearing children was the chief end of a woman's existence; she was supposed to have "all the Lord wanted her to." Barrenness was considered almost a curse and failure to marry, a disgrace.

At any rate Grandma's status as a widow was decidedly different from what it had been before her marriage, three weeks previous. When Grandpa H. came again to woo, after a reasonable interval, things were more easily managed. His first wife was not consulted, and after a rather surreptitious courtship the marriage was arranged. The young husband left for a trip north with a load of dried fruit and a wife-to-be acquired without his first wife's knowledge after he left home.

Obviously such an arrangement would be attended by difficulties. Much of Grandpa's property had come as a result of Suzette's contribution and she, naturally, did not favor sharing it. Grandma did not have a similar contribution to make, so it was impos-

sible for the two women to be equal economically. Grandma was humiliated by the fact that her children could not dress as well as Suzette's; she was embarrassed that she did not receive equal recognition from Grandpa in public.

When the federal officers came into the country, and Grandpa might have a prison term to face if he were caught, he bought a home in Nevada about sixty miles away and moved Grandma and her five children to it. He provided her with a farm, got her a cow, pig, and chickens, and seemed to feel that he had done his duty toward her maintenance. She was independent and proud; she wouldn't ask for anything. His land, cattle, store, and church duties, as well as the almost impassable roads, all kept him tied in his home town; his visits became more and more rare until there was an almost complete estrangement.

In the meantime he had taken two other wives, one a widow with her own home and some additional property (which he managed well), the other a girl scarcely older than some of his children. I have often wondered how these three managed, for I understand that the last wife was almost as jealous as the first.

I never saw Grandpa H. until I was eighteen years old, but I had formed an unfavorable opinion of him. What I actually met was a splendid old man, well respected, successful, intelligent. As I came to know him better I decided that he was, in part at least, the victim of circumstances. Given wives of the types his were, I hardly see how he could have done otherwise.

One day when I was talking about it with Grandma I ventured to ask, "If you had not been sealed to another man, so that you both felt the children belonged to him instead of Grandpa, do you think it would have made any difference?"

"Well, yes"—reluctantly—"maybe it would. Your Grandpa was a good man. I think I would do the same thing over again."

When I thought of the hardships, the poverty, the neglect she endured I wondered at it.

II

With my father's people, on the other hand, the polygamous set-up took a very different turn. Grandpa L. had something of the position of the patriarch in his family. His home life was probably patterned after the ancient leaders in Israel; at any rate, he commanded the same type of obedience and respect. I have tried to find out all I could about his early life in an effort to understand what there was about him that would keep five women and forty-eight children so loyal to him, and because of him, to one another. For they always mentioned their connection with pride. Grandpa L. was a typical pioneer, strong, sturdy, fearless, loving the out-of-doors. Incidentally, he was a great guide, scout, and Indian interpreter. When he was in his early twenties Brigham Young sent him, with three others, to prepare for colonization in the extreme southwestern part of the State. After a year of preparation, building, and establishing friendly relations with the Indians, he went north for his young wife, a girl of twenty, and the baby. With them he brought his wife's younger sister, to keep her company and help care for her during her coming second confinement. What could be expected but that he would marry the sister also? It was the doctrine taught; the girl was attractive; the first wife was willing. So the sisters lived congenially together and the Indians named Grandpa "Wamptun Tunghi," "Wamptun" meaning "more than one wife" and "Tunghi" meaning "one who tells or explains," or an interpreter.

It is hard to imagine what their life must have been like, completely cut off from the outside, without any comfort or convenience, entirely upon their own resources. Grandpa was away a great deal, often for long periods, so the women were company for each other. After several years, when two or three thriving towns had been established in the vicinity and Grandpa had begun to get prosperous, he married his third wife, my grandmother. She was a young English girl who was very much attracted by the thirty-year-old man in spite of his two other growing families. I have not been able to learn any of the details of their courtship. I only know that I have never seen two people more devoted to each other in their old age. The young girl seemed to live on peaceable, congenial terms with the first two wives, however. His fourth wife was a young Indian girl who had been raised from birth in a white home of culture and refinement but was, nevertheless, a full-blooded Indian. Evidently this choice of his was influenced by the interest in the Indians, then especially intense, because of their connection with the Book of Mormon and the promise that "they should yet become a white and delightful people." Grandpa shared this interest and belief; he had worked as a missionary for years and no doubt wished to see the prophecy fulfilled. This Indian girl did not fit so well with the other wives; I have never heard of any difficulty or difference, but I know that in all her married life she maintained a separate establishment, poor enough it is true, but always by herself, while the others often lived two in a house. The fifth wife was a widow of one of his dear friends, left with five children. He assumed the responsibility of this family in his middle life.

I knew all five of these wives well and was taught to address them all as Grandma—Grandma Mary, Grandma

Maria (pronounced Miriar), Grandma Thurza, Grandma Jeanette, and Grandma Martha. They have been at my father's home many times and, as a child, I have eaten meals in every one of theirs. I wondered at their friendliness with one another and at my father's almost equal respect for them all. For they all bore children, 12, 12, 10, 11, and 3 respectively. The infant mortality was 1, 1, 2, 3, and 2, in the same order, a remarkably low one when living conditions are considered—the barren desert land, the heat, flies, comfortless living quarters, and lack of any medical aid whatever, even in childbirth.

While all this family was growing up, Grandpa L. had interests and holdings in several towns and ranches. He would station a wife and family at each of these and divide his time among them as he found it necessary, trusting to the older boys of each group to take the initiative in managing things. He was as a monarch over his small domain, benevolent and kindly, but to be obeyed without hesitation or question. His children tell how, when "Father" came, things were set to rights, the best food prepared, the children scrubbed and marshaled in to family prayers. At his arrival there would be a sort of council meeting at which every member of any of the families in the vicinity would be present. Here Grandpa would review his doings since the last visit in some detail and have each child report on his activities. Difficulties between children were settled at these general council meetings; religious instructions were also given here. Grandpa was truly a patriarch; everyone waited on him; everyone wanted to wait on him. One child brought his shoes, another got him a drink, another prepared water in the basin and a clean towel for him to wash, and so on. He was always expected to have the choicest food; a special section of

"picked biscuits" made of cream was always reserved in one corner of the large pan of buttermilk bread baked for the family.

But he somehow held the group together and built up a sense of family solidarity which made the children all consider themselves full brothers and sisters regardless of which wife their mother happened to be. They were all Grandpa L.'s sons so completely that it is only recently that I have learned to which wife the various ones belong.

I wish I had known Grandpa as a young man. My memory of him after he had grown old is very vivid; in fact many of the clearest memories of my childhood are connected with him. He had a great shock of snow-white hair, a large trunk, powerful arms and shoulders, but crippled, bowed legs. When he died at eighty-six his teeth were perfect, not a cavity nor a missing tooth among them, and I doubt that he ever saw a toothbrush. Even as an old man he was still ambitious; he could not be happy unless he accomplished something. My father would haul loads and loads of green cottonwood and Grandpa would sit on a low, homemade, rawhide bottomed chair and chop it up, while we children ricked it up in long piles as high as we could reach. Grandpa's axe was always kept sharp and shining, and woe be unto the youngster who ever touched it.

He often visited our home a block away, this old chair as a support in one hand, a cane in the other. Several times en route he would stop and sit on the chair to rest. He sat to dig most of our cistern, a large hole fourteen feet in diameter and eighteen feet deep. His ability to throw the dirt out was a source of pride to him and astonishment to the neighbors.

I used to curl up on the floor in front of the huge fireplace in his home and listen to his Indian songs and stories. Captain John Smith "had nothing on

him" when it came to narrow escapes, for Grandpa L. had three different times come near death at the Indians' hands. As he told of his experiences, however, he always attributed his deliverance to "the hand of the Lord" or the fact that "the Lord softened their hearts." These stories might have been slightly colored by time, imagination, and frequent retelling—I have no means of knowing—but in the main they were facts, and his manner of telling them was so convincing that I always got prickly sensations along my spine to the roots of my hair.

I remember his prayers, long, eloquent prayers, usually expressed in general terms and with little variation. Some phrases linger, such as "hasten the day when the Enemies of Zion will be stamped out and their evil designs become as naught," and "the blood of the Prophets will be avenged and righteousness cover the earth as the waters the mighty deep." Likewise I remember his frequent exhortations to his children to "pay your debts, walk uprightly before God, and keep yourselves unspotted from the sins of the world." He was always insisting that each one own his own home that he might not be in "bondage" to any man; he advised that each maintain at least a two-year supply of grain in advance, against the time of famine "when you can't buy a sack of grain with a sack of gold."

I shall never forget how wrought up he became when knitted "garments" were introduced into our town. He threatened those who wore them with dire evils because, he said, these articles were a deviation from the true form, Gentiles had probably had a hand in making them and they were desecrated and defiled. The "garment" should be made and marked in the home by the Latter Day Saint wife, according to the revealed pattern and design. It was secret and sacred and not to be traded in or flaunted in public.

This, then, may give a faint idea of my impressions of my two Grandfathers, and the information I have been able to gather about them. The fact that each had more than one wife did not seem unusual; it was accepted by everyone as a matter of course.

III

It is interesting to study the type of children each produced. I have not yet secured complete statistics for the family of Grandpa H. I know that as a group they are very successful financially. They are also much inclined toward education; many of the grandchildren have become teachers, several at least have Master's degrees, and one has a Ph.D. They are all leaders in their various communities, all respected citizens.

Of Grandpa L.'s family I have more definite statistics. Of his 48 children, 10 died in infancy; 2 were killed accidentally after reaching maturity, one from the kick of a horse, the other from getting caught in a molasses mill; 3 died of illness after they were grown, two of typhoid and one of pneumonia; two remained unmarried, and one married but bore no children. This leaves a total of 30 who reproduced. These were a remarkable group physically, all being large and well-formed, without a deformity among them. Three of the forty-eight seemed subnormal mentally; one grew to maturity without ever being able to talk, while the other two were considered "queer" by their brothers and sisters. There is no question as to their low mental capacity, but as neither of them married, the problem has been minimized.

It is difficult to measure the accomplishments of this group. Living as they did under pioneer conditions, they had little opportunity to advance educationally; their energies were taken in clearing land, building dams, and dig-

ging irrigation ditches, and as they grew older, in establishing homes of their own. Their social contributions were made by holding various church and civic positions. Five of the thirteen sons filled missions, devoting at least two years each, entirely at their own expense, to the service of the church. The thirty who married produced a total of 265 children, or a family average of almost 9. Of this total, only two have any physical deformities, one a girl with a withered arm and one a boy with an eye defective from birth. Only one is subnormal mentally to the extent of being unable to do even simple school work. The infant mortality was 29 out of 265, a very creditable average, I believe, and due largely to improved living conditions. Many of these grandchildren of Grandpa L. are still young people, still unmarried, still going through school, so any statistics regarding their accomplishments would of necessity change from year to year. (The total number of 265 is accurate, however, because all the second generation are past the child-bearing age.) Of this total 171 have been married and 6 divorced; here they offer a contrast with their 30 parents, not one of whom ever separated. It is impossible at this stage to predict the size of the average family, but I am reasonably sure that it will be less than 9, since of the 171 married, 8 give evidence of being permanently childless. Statistics regarding educational achievements would also be of little value because so many of the younger members of this generation are still in the high-school stage.

IV

My own family might be taken as typical of the results of polygamy, since, as I have shown, both my parents were a result of the system. In some ways our group is rather different, chiefly in our desire for education; but that was

in part due to the fact that we accepted so literally the old Mormon proverbs, "Man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge," and "The Glory of God is Intelligence." My parents had eleven children, buried the first child when she was two years old and have raised the remaining ten—six girls and four boys—to maturity. All but the two youngest boys are married. They are in school, one a junior at college, the other doing graduate work.

Mother's babies came regularly every fifteen months to two and a half years, but she seemed always to enjoy good health. She is to-day remarkably young looking and vigorous for a woman of sixty.

I do not remember a serious illness in the family. As children we all ran the gauntlet of mumps, whooping cough, and measles with surprising lack of inconvenience. All the girls are healthy specimens; the boys average over six feet in height and one hundred and eighty pounds in weight.

Of the ten, 6 have now finished college and one is in his junior year, one has a Master's degree from Columbia University, and another is working toward his at the University of Nevada. Of the remaining three, two completed junior college work and taught in the primary grades. Only one of the ten, the youngest girl, failed to do college work; she married too early. Eight of the ten have been and are teachers.

Our desire for education might be taken only as the old pioneering spirit of our Grandpa transferred from the physical to the intellectual fields; it might be only the things our mother and father wanted and could not have which were now finding expression in us. For we were poor; not poorer than our neighbors, but poor. What it was that made my parents buy a piano when we children were still going bare-foot (I never owned a pair of shoes in

the summer nor more than one a winter until I was fourteen), how it was that they could subscribe for three or four of the better magazines while we were still eating off whitegranite plates, I don't know, unless it was just a sense of values created by a combination of teaching and pioneer spirit. Anyway we all got through high school, because when the oldest child was in the eighth grade, one was begun in our town, tuition free and books furnished. I should add perhaps that my father was one of the board of trustees responsible for this beginning and that he continued there until long after its permanency was established. Going to college may not mean much to people who live in a college town or who have plenty of money, but for us it was a genuine adventure. After one had finished and secured a good position things were simplified; but for those first years no word will express the experience except "adventure." The nearest college was four hundred miles away, over unimproved roads, among strange and, to us, wealthy people; the undertaking looked stupendous, as it was. The details of how we did it will have to be another story, but it is enough to say that we graduated, six of us—three with distinction, all above average in our various fields; and all of us secured positions.

But I must get back to my general theme of polygamy. My most intimate knowledge of the every-day living of it came from my best girl friend, who was a polygamous child about my age. For the first eighteen years of my life I lived across the street from her, and we were together almost constantly. I had never considered her family as being different from mine, except that it was larger. There was nothing secret, nothing unusual at all about it. The wives lived in the same block; between them was the family granary and tool shop, in the center of the block the cor-

als and haystack. Each wife had her own cow, pigs, chickens, and garden; both seemed to have access to the granary and hay stacks. Uncle Tom spent one night at one home and the next at the other, regularly, as long as I knew him, unless there were sickness at one home or the other, when he stayed to help with it.

Since they lived just across the street from our home, we could hear him routing his boys out to work at day-break every morning. (By the way, his first wife bore him 7 sons and 4 daughters, the second, 7 daughters and 4 sons, all of whom are still living, all but two married, and not a death yet among either children or grandchildren! I have a picture of the whole group, taken a year ago at Uncle Tom's golden wedding—truly a remarkable thing.) But as I was saying, Uncle Tom got up early and insisted that all the boys do likewise, insisted in a voice that could be heard distinctly by the neighbors. He always began with the oldest and named all who were old enough to do either chores or farm work. He always drawled the first name or two and became more staccato as he proceeded until the last few sounded with a pop, "Tom-mie, John-nie, Myron, Eldon, Will, Lem, Vincen, Lorin," etc. Somehow he kept order among them all, and co-operation to the extent that his haystacks were larger, his granaries better filled, and his children better dressed than any of his neighbors. No one saw anything unusual in the fact that when he went to church or to any public gathering he always took both wives and always walked between them. The children were all treated alike; his pride in them and his tendency to brag publicly of them became something of a town joke. When he died, a week ago, every child was present at the funeral service and I have never seen more genuine evidence of respect anywhere.

I know these examples are only a few, but I believe they are fairly typical. I am sure there were many terrible things about polygamy, even under the best of conditions, but I am equally sure that it was not so bad as it has been painted. People entered into it with a high, religious purpose, not for lust, judging from the type of people I have known. The women, especially, kept the institution reasonable, I believe. I have heard older women in telling their experiences relate how, before the manifesto, various married men had made advances to them and been repulsed because "he couldn't support the family he had," or "he had his nerve to ask me after the way he treats his first wife," or "he's like that—tried to play up to every girl he met and couldn't stay true to any," and so on. A married man had to be fairly successful financially, well respected in the community, and personally attrac-

tive to secure more than one wife; but given these qualities, it was not difficult.

I have no means of telling whether the system would have died of itself (certainly there were many who abused it and many others who entered it with the best of motives who found themselves unable to live it), but I am sure the persecution by the United States marshals only served to popularize and strengthen it. For what man would desert wives taken in good faith, and dependent children? All the families in all the communities naturally combined to shield him and help him evade the law.

I am glad, however, that polygamy is not practiced now. It would be a difficult system to live in unless one's religious zeal were ardent enough to enable one to forget jealousies and personal desires. That zeal, among the people of my grandfather's generation, kept it sane.

