

Number of Wives

In general, the most visible leaders of the Church practiced plural marriage. This was true for men as well as women; from the President of the Church to the President of the Relief Society, polygamists set the standard of obedience for Church members. The majority of female general leaders in the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary organizations belonged to polygamous families, and virtually every General Authority had multiple wives, as did most stake presidents and bishops.²²

Brigham Young, the iconic polygamist, had fifty-five wives, and Heber C. Kimball had forty-three. Other polygamous husbands had far fewer wives. According to one demographic study, most polygamous men (66.3 percent) married only one plural wife. Thereafter, 21.2 percent married three women, 6.7 percent married four, and 5.8 percent married five or more women.²³

Ages of Spouses

A common misconception is that many polygamists were elderly men who married young women. Plural wives were often younger than their husbands, as was broadly the case in monogamous marriages, but the age differences were generally not as radical as stereotypes depicted. A man usually married his first wife in his early twenties while his wife was in her late teens. If he married a second wife, 75 percent would have done so by age thirty-five. If he married a third, he likely would have done so by age forty. The majority of men who married a fourth wife did so between the ages of thirty-six and forty-five.²⁴ The average age at which a man stopped marrying was forty.²⁵ The ages of women at their time of marriage did not mirror the age variabilities of men, and the overwhelming majority of plural wives married for the first time before age twenty-five.²⁶

There were exceptions, of course. At age thirty-eight, “spinster” Martha Spence married Joseph Heywood as a plural wife, a man several years her junior. On their first anniversary,

she wrote rapturously of their precious newborn babe and the joy of "having a husband to care and watch over me that I feel to reverence, love and esteem and connected with a family that I am proud to be a member of, and realize that I am much happier now than I was a year ago."²⁷

For marriages between young women and much older men, there was sometimes an element of coercion or obligation. Karen Kirstine Poulsen, an emigrant from Denmark, was fourteen years old when Herman J. Christensen, age thirty-seven, asked that she become his third wife. Herman was a prosperous Church and civic leader in their community, and Karen Kirstine's parents told her to marry him because he was "a wealthy man and could take care of her." She reluctantly accepted his proposal and cried the morning of their wedding on July 23, 1858.²⁸

Some women deliberately chose an older husband. One extreme example is second wife Mary Jane McCleve, who recounted: "I was married Nov. 12 [1856] to Dr. Priddy Meeks who was 61 and I 16. It was love at first sight, even though he had three grown girls older than myself. . . . Ten children blessed our union."²⁹ Priddy wrote in his journal: "People may say what they want about mismated in age in marriage, but the Lord knows best about these matters. And if ever there was a match consummated by the providences of God this was one."³⁰

"Polygamy in Low Life"

The Saints' relative isolation in the Mountain West left polygamy much to the outsider's imagination. Newspapers and books often presented wildly sensationalized views of polygamy, and Latter-day Saints, particularly women, felt profoundly misrepresented. "We are accustomed to hearing wonderful tales of the horrors of Mormon women," wrote plural wife Kirstine Christensen Baird. "We only laugh in our own minds at the stories told about our hardships, and grim looks