

Cuppa Joe | Historic Sites Lecture Series | Sister to the Prophet: Life of Katharine Smith Salisbury | Kyle Walker

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Kyle Walker, Wendy Eaton

Wendy Eaton 00:00

Welcome to Cuppa Joe, where we explore Community of Christ history. I'm your host, Wendy Eaton, here at Cuppa Joe. We partner with Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation to interview the presenters from our winter book club called "An Evening with the Historians". Our guest today is Kyle Walker, who shared about his book titled, Sister to the Prophet, The Life of Katharine Smith Salisbury. Welcome Kyle.

Kyle Walker 00:59

Thank you for having me. Good to be here.

Wendy Eaton 01:02

Serves as an administrator in the counseling center at BYU, Idaho. He's been a member of the John Whitmer Historical Association since 2005 and served on the Board of Directors from 2016 to 2019. He is the immediate past president of John Whitmer, and he is the author and/or editor of several books focused on the Smith family. So Kyle, I have long loved women's history within the restoration movement, and having lived in Nauvoo, I've spent some time with Smith women in my days. Katharine is one of the women that I was always aware of, but I just never took the time to chase after her life story. What drew you to explore and share Katharine's story?

Kyle Walker 01:55

Yeah, I did a kind of a collected volume of short biographies on each member of the Smith family back in 2005, and when I did that, I started to gather materials on each member of the Smith family. And I was surprised at how much there was on Katharine, in particular, William as well. And I did a biography on William, but Katharine surprised me, because there's just not that many first generation, Latter Day Saint women that you could do a biography of. And, you know, I'd really estimate there's only a handful you could do that. And Katharine had enough sources and lived long enough that you could really get to know who she was and the more I got into that, and kind of kept that in the back of my mind. After that book chapter I did in 2005, I began to research more and and discovered that there were a number

of sources on Katharine where you could really put together her story or the lifespan. So I was excited about that. And I also love women's history and I think women's voices need to be highlighted in the restoration.

Wendy Eaton 03:03

I couldn't agree more with that. And so you've already alluded to this. There's always challenges in uncovering history. Did you have any particular difficult points in trying to find Katharine's story?

Kyle Walker 03:19

Yeah, just tracking down those sources was a challenge. The majority are in the Community of Christ archives and Independence. But I was surprised that there were a number of letters in the church history library in Salt Lake City, because Katharine corresponded with the number of LDS church leaders later in life, as well as her nephews, who were coming and going from the Salt Lake Valley, as they went to missions, they would criss-cross through Illinois, and often stop and visit with Katharine. And so that added some rich detail to Katharine's situation in the Midwest, and her values and even items on succession, and kind of her attitude about succession, and which I think reflected all the Smith sisters through Katharine's writings. And so, in addition, there were a number of letters that were still within the family. And so tracking down descendants. Estel Neff used to have a little bookstore in Nauvoo. If you remember Estel,...

Wendy Eaton

I do remember Estel.

Kyle Walker

I had a bookstore for years and years, maybe decades, there on Mulholland Street. He's a direct descendant of Katharine, and he had some letters that have been passed through Katharine's son, Solomon. And so, he shared those letters with me and some photographs that he had, but the biggest cash was across the river in Burlington, Iowa, where Mary Dennis lived. And it's interesting that Katharine passed many of her letters down, kind of on this female line, and you can track that back, and they stayed with her granddaughter, and then she passed them to her daughter, and on down to this Mary Dennis. When I was researching in the early 2000s, she had a lot of documents from Katharine, and a lot of photographs of her reunions towards the end of her life. She also had Katharine's photobook, which had a picture of Emma L. Smith was the first picture in her book, and a picture of William Smith that they later used in the Joseph Smith papers, and some of those nephews that she was corresponding with out in Salt Lake City. And so those were just invaluable in putting the story together. But pulling all that together was a challenge, and took many years of research.

Wendy Eaton 05:45

You mentioned Emma a couple times, and in your book, you talk about Katharine living in Fountain Green, Illinois, which is just on the opposite side of the county from where Emma lived there in Nauvoo. Can you tell if they had much contact and correspondence? Living so close and having a lot of shared understanding between the two of them?

Kyle Walker 06:08

You pick up Katharine's admiration for Emma in some of her surviving letters. And even before Joseph Smith's death, Katharine and her children would often go to Joseph's and Emma's home for the holidays around Christmastime, and she often mentioned Emma's kindness and taking care of them and her hospitality. But I assume that continued. I think Katharine was busy raising her four boys during the 1850s and 1860s, but there was interaction and after Katharine joins the RLDS church in 1873, her closest contact is Alexander Hale Smith, Joseph's and Emma's son. Alexander Hale, who often will come out and preach when Katharine desires an RLDS minister to come out and preach in that rural community, and Alexander will baptize some of Katharine's grandchildren as well in that area of Fountain Green and help with the branch that's organized there. It's called the Pilot Grove branch. It's organized in that vicinity by the year 1873 and so they kept in close contact. Maybe the one tidbit that has survived is that Katharine's son served as pallbearer at Emma's funeral. So I think that speaks to the relationship they had with Emma.

Wendy Eaton 07:38

Yeah, Alexander is quite a powerhouse in those days. I think, out of all of Emma's children, he knew Hancock County better than anyone else. So it doesn't surprise me one bit to hear that he would have spent time with his Aunt Katharine. Yes, so as the longest living Smith family member among Lucy's and Joseph, Sr.'s, children, Katharine witnessed a lot of history. How do you think that impacted her interpretation of the early restoration events?

Kyle Walker 08:13

Yeah, not only did she experience those early events of being driven from Ohio and Missouri, with the main body of the saints, she settles right on that eastern edge of Hancock County, and right among some of those who had marched to Carthage and participated with the mob and when Joseph and Hyrum were killed there in Carthage. And so, she continues to experience a lot of religious persecution in the second half of her life, which was very difficult, very hard on her children and and on her personally. Her son is even murdered in 1880 at a political rally, which was very devastating for Katharine. But it's interesting, towards the end of her life, at these birthday reunions she would have in July each year, especially towards in the 1890s all of her posterity would gather. And one of the things she would do at these gatherings is she would sit her grandchildren, great- grandchildren, down, and she would tell some of these stories of the early restoration, especially those that she participated in. And one of the things she liked to do is tell some events of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. She would talk about the first vision. And one event that stood out to some of the grandchildren is when she would tell about the Methodist minister whom Joseph tried to tell his vision to, and who rejected his story. All of the grandchildren would raise their fists in protest, and then Katharine would say to them, now, children and grandchildren, what your Uncle Joseph was telling them was a very strange, very hard to believe story. Right? And it's almost like she has this temperate approach to the restoration events. And by that point, knowing that a lot of people did not accept the story of the restoration, she always defended it, but she had kind of a balanced view of being able to deal with these neighbors who were hostile, often towards the restoration and her brother, Joseph Smith, and so just kind of had a temper approach. And in retelling these events as she talked to her children, I just find that interesting to her children and grandchildren.

Wendy Eaton 10:37

Sounds like Katharine and Emma had a lot of similar qualities and in their approach to the restoration history and their own experiences with it.

Kyle Walker 10:46

Yes, I think it does. Yeah.

Wendy Eaton 10:48

So was, was there anything you found in Katharine's life that is really stuck with you as you've continued on after publishing this book?

Kyle Walker 11:04

Yeah, probably just her ability to push through extreme hardships and challenges that she experienced in her life. Maybe we could go through all of those challenges. I highlight those in the book. But you know, she has a husband that's only intermittently available as a provider who struggled with alcohol use. She lost several children, similar to Emma in infancy. She was driven. She had poverty, extreme poverty, that they dealt with throughout her entire adult life. It's not until probably the 1870s and 1880s where she's finally has a home of her own and more stability in her life. I mentioned the murder of her son, Alvin, that she deals with later in life, and kind of the loss of his family as they move away from Illinois. After that murder, he was married and had children, and they leave for Kansas, so she really never sees them again. So just a lot of hardships that she had, and she always maintained a positivity, even about her husband, and her husband dies early. So there's another hardship. She's a widow by the year 1853 so for the next 40 plus years of her life, she's a widow, and always spoke positively of her husband when she referred to him, to the children, encouraging to her children, teaching her children, wanting her children to be religiously inclined, and so I just admire her, her grit, her temperance, her willingness to push forward under extreme hardships.

Wendy Eaton 12:51

Bring up Katharine's experience raising her children and motherhood was a major part of her life. What did your research tell you about Katharine as a mother?

Kyle Walker 13:04

Well, you recall Lucy Mack Smith and how admired she was among the saints, to the point that by the Nauvoo period, she's afforded the privilege of speaking in general conference, which was fairly unheard of in the 19th century for a woman to speak in general conference, and yet, there she is in 1845 and she's speaking. And there was even one point, Brigham Young is saying, "Who recognizes Lucy Mack Smith as the mother of Israel?" And everybody raises their hand, almost like a vote of confidence as a mother in Israel. Well, Katharine has a similar experience in the RLDS church, where people are looking to her. Members of the RLDS faith are looking to her as kind of this living link between the early church and the reorganized church, and to the point that towards the end of her life, she's sitting on the stand with RLDS leaders at some of the conferences, and then delivering talks at these conferences, or sharing a testimony at a conference in the stone church in independence and at other district conferences, she's a speaker there and sharing some of these events. And one of the things she does, which is also similar to Lucy, is she's extolling these virtues of what it meant to be a woman in the early restoration. And I think she felt kind of a mandate to do that, almost a responsibility, or a missionary

obligation, to share those values and pass those on to the next generation. So you pick that up. It's also interesting within the family, what kind of mother she is. I make this point in the book that she kind of holds to the more traditional values of what it meant to be a pious, religious mother in the 19th century. By the 1850s or so, some of those societal norms were softening in most churches, but I argue that Katharine holds to a more traditional style of mothering, and so she's often kind of getting after her boys, who remember, don't have their father by the 1850s, and I'll just give you one account where her son, Solomon, was blessed by Joseph Smith in Kirtland that he would become a preacher and preach Mormonism in his life. But by the early 1870s even after he's married and has his own children, he really wants nothing to do with that, and Katharine will continue to chide him and remind him about this blessing that he received from Joseph Smith, that he was supposed to be a preacher. And at one point, Solomon says, "Well, I'll prove him to be a false prophet, because I have no interest in preaching". But Katharine stays after him, and eventually he goes through this conversion experience, which I highlight in the book, where he's sick and Joseph Smith III comes, and he's baptized, and then he becomes a minister there in that Pilot Grove branch that I referred to earlier, and eventually oversees the Nauvoo district and is admired and respected as a great preacher in that area. So that just gives you a feel for Katharine and some of her values. Some other values that she promoted was conservative dress, making clothes that should be produced by your own hands. Some of those kinds of values as well in the earlier RLDS church.

Wendy Eaton 16:42

And fascinating to learn more about the life of Katharine Smith Salisbury. And I encourage everyone to go pick up your book again. It's titled, "Sister to the Prophet, The Life of Katharine Smith Salisbury." And also, I'd like to reflect back to the Historic Sites Foundation lecture, which is recorded on our website. If they'd like to watch your original lecture, because you share some incredible photographs from Katharine's family, including her boys, as you put it. And it's always great to put a face to these names as we hear their stories. So do you have anything else you'd like to add about Katharine's life before we draw to the close?

Kyle Walker 17:37

Just that she lived a remarkable life. Again, she was the longest surviving member of the Smith family and was there from the very first. So, any of her recollections are very valuable when studying the early restoration and even the early reorganized church in that area of Illinois. And so just grateful that I could share a little bit about Katharine and my respected admiration for her and her contributions.

Wendy Eaton 18:07

It was definitely a very important witness and participant in their early moments of the movement. Well, thank you, Kyle, for taking time to join us here on Project Zion Podcast. And again, his book is titled, "Sister to the Prophet, The Life of Katharine Smith Salisbury." Thank you again, Kyle. This has been Cuppa Joe, and I'm your host, Wendy Eaton. This has been a part of Project Zion Podcast. Thanks for listening.