Introduction

Finding the letters

In late summer, many years ago, I went with my wife and her parents to Fall Creek (Illinois) township and the McNutt family farmhouse. New tenants were moving in, and some decisions had to be made about various family items that had made their way to the attic of the 1849 farmhouse, a farmhouse whose land deed had been signed by President James Monroe. In an old trunk in that attic, we found letters—letters more than 140 years old.

Some of them were in envelopes; some without. Most of the valuable stamps had been torn or cut off. Shredded remains had been used as nests for mice, but a surprising number of the letters were intact. With only a little interest, we looked at some, dusted off others, and put all into a convenient shoebox while we decided whether a hatstand was worth wrestling down a narrow staircase.

For two years the letters stayed in shoeboxes on a closet shelf. Then one February day, when the world seemed an endless grey, we opened the box and slowly began reading directly from a century we had only heard about before. The writing on many of the pages was very clear, a result of good ink and better paper. Soon, reading the letters and transcribing them into typewritten copy became a pleasant winter pastime. But transcription required not just deciphering the words on the pages, but knowing who was being written about, who was being written to, and what was being referred to. Research followed, and the result of that research is this volume.

The letters were written to Miriam (Works) McNutt, called "Mollie." She was the niece and namesake of Miriam (Works) Young, the first wife of Mormon leader Brigham Young. She was my wife's great grandmother. Many of the letters were written by her cousins, almost

every one a follower of Joseph Smith, Jr., the founder of the Mormon religion. The bulk of them were written between 1860 and 1869, during and immediately after the Civil War and during the early formative days of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Of the letters that survived, 111 are reprinted here. Most are from that time in Mollie's life just before and after her marriage. Some later letters, from`the 1880s on, are included because they explain what happened to people who wrote to her during those eventful 1860s.

The letters come from three primary places: Pleasant Plains (now, Pleasanton), a small town in extreme south central Iowa; Eagleville, Missouri, a town immediately over the border from Pleasant Plains; and LaGrange, Missouri, a former bustling steamboat stop on the Mississippi River, eight miles north of Quincy, Illinois. Although there are postmarks on the letters from St. Joseph, Missouri, and Farmington, Illinois, for instance, they occur because the people in these three primary towns travelled for a short time to other places and wrote from there. The other places from which Mollie received letters were the forts, camps, or post hospitals that were the mailing addresses of her cousins and friends in the Union army.

Mollie received these letters because in the fall of 1862 she left Pleasant Plains and travelled to Payson, Fall Creek township, near Quincy, Illinois, to begin a new life away from her Mormon[1] heritage. She and her brother, Perry, had been orphans since she was eight and he, five. He had stayed in Illinois while Mollie had been taken to Iowa to live and work for an aunt. Aunt and uncle were Mormon, and, with them, Mollie found herself in the Mormon community of Decatur County, Iowa. There she grew to young adulthood. At sixteen she decided to find her brother and return to Illinois.

While she modestly made a life of her own, her friends and cousins wrote to her. Without a true home that she could remember, the letters she received became precious to her. She kept them even after she married. Sometimes she would hide them under rugs in her farmhouse. Few of her husband's relatives remembered her childhood friends, and Mollie, who had never been Mormon and felt a certain embarrassment about the more scandalous aspects of the religion, rarely talked about her very early life. She died in 1920. In the trunk she had brought with her from Iowa were the letters.

Editing the letters

Nothing in the letters has been deleted in this publication of them.[2] They are as they have survived. This includes their sometimes elaborate formal salutations, openings, and closings. From the earliest (1860) letters to the latest (1912), the language of the letters becomes more modern, even telegraphic. All of the idiosyncrasies of a letter writer's style are preserved.

Spelling has been standardized to make the letters easier to read. The cue for this editorial decision was taken from the writers themselves, many of whom begged Mollie to "excuse bad spelling and writing and make all well." In an age when spelling was far from uniform, it is hardly surprising that a letter writer might spell "unis," without capitalization, when she meant "Eunice." To save today's reader having to struggle through such spellings and to free the letters of an unwholesome peppering of footnotes, all spelling has been "made well."

Punctuation and capitalization have been added where there were none in some of the letters. Often, letter writers made no distinction between the end of one sentence and the beginning of another—no period, no capital letter. In some cases, this resulted in ambiguous meanings. Research resolved most quandaries as to whether a prepositional phrase such as "in the spring" or an adverbial clause such as "when I saw you last" belonged at the beginning of the next sentence or at the end of the last sentence.

Paragraphing, a clarification device unknown to most of the letter writers, was done simply in the edited versions. A new topic deserved a new paragraph, even if it was a one sentence paragraph. The letter writers, after all, were closer to a tradition in which sentences were sometimes written perpendicularly across others in order to save paper and postage. A reader had to extract meaning from a grid of words as if it were hidden behind a cross-wire fence. Though none of Mollie's letter writers practiced this older tradition, very few of them used paragraphs, and some pages of the actual letters are hemmed with tinier and tinier words that are stitched to an edge in a somewhat desperate effort to save another piece of paper.

Where the full name of the person who is written about is known, the name is written directly into the letter. For instance, where Louisa

Booth actually wrote, "Olive and I went to meeting up to your Uncle's to meeting and I give Grace the letter you sent to her..." bracketed names identifying the people referred to allow the reader a better understanding of the passage, so that, in the edited version, it reads, "Olive [Booth] and I went to meeting up to your Uncle [Ebenezer Robinson]'s to meeting and I give Grace [Robinson] the letter you sent to her..."[3]

Finally, the letters were put into a standard format. The dateline was usually in the upper right of the first page of most of the letters, so all of the letters were standardized in this way. Most letters separated the salutation from the body of the letter, so that, too, became standard. Where pictorial material was added to the letters (an outline of a strawberry to impress Mollie with its size, the stick figure of a man, etc.) notes in brackets indicate where in the letter these occur. Sometimes there were extraneous additions to the letters: a name and address of someone, the lyrics of the national anthem. These were transcribed with the letter as well to show that the letters, after they were received, were sometimes reused. In fact, the rare letter *from* rather than to Mollie has survived because it was written on the back of a letter written to her.

Background of the letters

Because it is necessary to read the letters with Mollie's memory, not ours, a CHRONOLOGY OF PAST EVENTS precedes the letters. This chronology is a concise list of events in the Asa Works family as it was affected by the Mormon movement. Asa Works, Mollie's paternal grandfather, and the first father-in-law of Brigham Young, began as a fifer in the Revolutionary War in Massachusetts and was buried in Nauvoo, Illinois, just before the Mormons abandoned that stronghold. Although the beginnings of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Civil War affected Mollie most, without some notion of her past, we cannot begin to understand the actions of those adults who influenced her early life. The CHRONOLOGY OF PAST EVENTS gives a bare outline of that past.

In 1842, Mollie's parents were married in Adams County, Illinois. Until that time, her father had gone with his parents as they moved from Aurelius town, Cayuga County, New York (near Auburn), to

Kirtland, Ohio, and on to Far West, Missouri, following the migrations of the early Mormon church. In Far West (near present-day Independence), the persecution of the Mormon settlements by the Missouri mobs and the infamous executive order by Governor Lilburn Boggs to "exterminate" the Mormons eventually drove the sect to Illinois. The people of Adams County were moved by the atrocities the Mormons suffered in Missouri, such as the killing of 42 people that came to be known as the Haun's Mill massacre. The Illinoisians welcomed the retreating Mormons to Quincy and the surrounding countryside in the winter of 1839.

With the help of his son-in-law Ebenezer Robinson, Asa Works, his wife, and his two youngest sons settled in a country home outside the city of Quincy. Soon, however, the Robinsons moved north to Nauvoo, the city the Mormons were building on the Mississipppi riverfront in a grand way. The Workses, except for Mollie's father, Asa Daniel (now in his early twenties) moved with the Robinsons. On January 23, 1842, Asa Daniel Works married Deborah Malcolm, a young woman who had come from New Jersey with her sister, Rachel (Malcolm) Stewart. The couple moved to the new city of Millville (now Marblehead), Illinois, south of Quincy. Like many other towns on the banks of the upper Mississippi River, Millville was full of people hoping to prosper as a favorite port of call for steamboats.

Besides farming, Asa taught school. His small family did not have luxuries: two horses, two cows, three hogs, and a wagon. In contrast, Deborah's brother-in-law Samuel Stewart, had five head of cattle and hogs, and other goods and chattel, $100 more of taxable property than Asa had. Inside the Works' cabin, Deborah had tables and chairs, bedsteads, a stove, pots and pans, and a desk coffee mill. Asa had carpentry tools, plows, a lot of hogback, and a lot of beef—enough to last the family through the year. There was one cradle.[4]

Miriam Works was the first child of Asa and Deborah's to live (a son, Leander, had died earlier). "Miriam," meaning "thick, strong," was the name of the biblical prophetess who was the sister of Moses and whom God punished for speaking against him. Her name's tradition did not fit Mollie, for she was small, thin, and by all accounts meek. Her name came to her from her father's sister, Miriam (Works) Young, Brigham's wife, and could be traced to her great grandmother, Miriam Marks, the mother of Abigail (Marks) Works, her father's

mother. Often, the nickname, "Mollie," was given to girls whose first names were "Mary," "Maryann," "Marian," "Mariam," or "Miriam." Mollie, as the letters prove, was called by all of these names.

If they were unsure what to call her, her friends and relatives were not likely to forget her birthday. She was born on the exact day that Hyrum and Joseph Smith, Jr., were killed in Carthage, Illinois—June 27, 1844. On that fateful day, firebells and churchbells aroused the people of Quincy—not to Mollie's birth, of course—but to the possibility that the dreaded Nauvoo Legion would be marching to avenge The Prophet's death. Hundreds from Hancock County, where Nauvoo was the largest city, abandoned their homes and farms and streamed south to Quincy, fearing Mormon reprisals. The next morning, when it was obvious there were to be no reprisals, they returned sheepishly to their homes. From the day of her birth to at least the day of her marriage, Mollie's life would be affected most by the forces that were unleashed by the visions of the Mormon Prophet from Palmyra.

As it was in the year of Mollie's birth, the Mississippi River, in 1851, flooded until it was "...like a vast sea from bluff to bluff." Families on "the bottoms" were drowned out and had to move to Quincy or other high ground.[5] Food prices were rising: Beef was 8 cents a pound, and mutton was 7 cents. A cholera epidemic was beginning. The winter of 1851 – 52 was very cold. Whatever the cause, cholera or cold, Asa Daniel Works died on January 18, 1852. His wife, Deborah, was very ill. She had moved the family—Mollie and Perry—in with her sister, Rachel. Perhaps because she felt herself dying, Deborah made her brother-in-law, Samuel Stewart, administrator of her estate. It was during this time that Mollie's most vivid childhood memory, seeing her aunt Rachel packing up the Works' goods and provisions—"stealing" them—burned itself into the mind of the seven-year-old. Three months later, her mother Deborah was dead, and the two orphans were given over to the guardianship of Samuel Stewart, who signed the official document by making an "X" for his name.

Mollie did not stay long with the Stewarts. When her aunt Adaline (Works) Bonney came from Quincy, Illinois, in the first week of September, 1852, Mollie gladly went with her. The Bonneys: Amasa and Adaline, but not their son, Joseph, decided to move north to a community of believers who had gone west as far as Iowa after

abandoning Nauvoo. The community was in Decatur County, near an area called Nine Eagles. Already there were such recognizable families as the George Moreys, the John Keowns, the Alfred Moffets, the Austin Cowles, and the Ebenezer Robinsons. The Amasa Bonneys, with Mollie in tow, joined them.

In Decatur County, Mollie grew from a girl to a young woman. While she did so, the adults she lived with, who could neither accept the leadership of Brigham Young, nor forget the religious exaltation of their early Mormon experience, worked to fashion a church, a religion, that they believed would be true to the best of what the Prophet from Palmyra had left them. They finally settled on Joseph Smith III, the son of the Prophet, as a leader. But the young man was not ready to wear his mantle until 1860.

In the meantime, schooling continued, and in Decatur County, Mollie was taught in the Moffet Schoolhouse. There she made friends with young people like Helen and Eunice Morey, Henry Cowles, George Keown, Sallie Monk, Bob Booth, and her own cousin, Gracie Robinson. In the many letters that she would receive, these were the names that would stir her memories.

Then, in February, 1859, her aunt Adaline died. Amasa Bonney decided to return to New York. Once again, Mollie was without a home. A cousin, Deborah Ann (Rockwell) Morey, who was a housewife before she was fifteen, had been recently given the added burden of caring for her brother's child. Mollie, the eager worker, moved in with the Moreys. When David Morey decided to move to Illinois in 1860, Mollie worked and lived in her aunt Angeline (Works) Robinson's home.

Ever since she was old enough to pull a stool up to a sink to stand on while she "did up the work" (washed and wiped dishes), she was earning her stay with her labor. It did not matter that her young cousin, Gracie Robinson, always seemed to have a "hurry call" that took her to the outhouse right after meals, Mollie worked and she learned from her aunt Angeline.

But as she grew older, she began to feel the pressures of her situation. She had not yet been baptized in Brush Creek by George Morey, head of the Little River Branch of the Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints. So many had been baptized in Brush Creek that it was known as "Mormon Pool." She was also coming to an age when

she should be married. Although the greater demands of the Civil War were felt later, already young men in Decatur County had enlisted and were leaving. And what of her brother, Perry? Where was he? Was he in the army? She had not seen or heard from him since she had so willingly left Illinois for Iowa.

This is Mollie's situation when she writes her first letter to her cousin Joe Bonney, who was living in LaGrange, Missouri. Joe's response is the earliest letter to Mollie that survives, and it begins the central part of this book, the letters in chronological order. Before each letter is a brief explanation of some of the people and events that Mollie would be familiar with. Through letters that span the years, Grace Robinson grows from an exuberant schoolgirl to the saddened matron who must, in one week, bury both her baby and her mother. At the same time, Amulek Boothe passes from a carefree young man to a religious convert, a soldier, a father, and finally a work-stiffened old farmer—all the while seeming to nurture a love for Mollie that was only a little beyond what cousins should show one another. These are only two of the stories that come alive by reading the letters.

Researching the letters

To work such magic, many minds and much charity was needed. Thanks go to the staffs of research facilities such as the Illinois Historical Library, the Illinois State Archives, the St. Louis Public Library, Auburn (New York) Historical Society, Case-Western Reserve Library, Newberry Library, Graceland College Library—especially its DuRose Room—and the archives of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the genealogical library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

There were unexpected and most generous sources of help from individual genealogists such as Mrs. Nancy Gerlock, a descendant of Deborah Ann Morey, and Mrs. Mary Hemphill, a descendant of James Marks Works. Charlotte Wright provided information on the Boothe family; and Betty June Johnson on Pleasant Plains and the Cowles family.

Inestimable are the kindnesses of McNutt family members, Mollie's grandsons George A. McNutt and Robert G. McNutt, who provided the letters themselves, many of the photographs, and encouragement through the years. A long memory and willingness to share that memory made the contributions of Miriam (McNutt)

Echols, another of Mollie's grandchildren and the last, so far, to bear her name, especially valuable. Some valuable private genealogy work was done by Mrs. Nell Simpson, a descendant of Iola (Bonney) Sellers. Out of a barn in Canton, Missouri, where they had been stored after her death, her notes, jumbled in a cardboard box, were given over to me.

The sources of information for the book are roughly divided into three categories. First, there are public sources such as censuses, deeds, records of wills, lists of soldiers, and other official documents. Then there are the common sources such as newspapers; the approved history of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; the applicable county histories; the biographies of the renowned and near-renowned; Civil War almanacs, old medical books; old song books; privately published family histories, such as those on the Gurleys and Rockwells; and the works of other scholars studying various aspects of the Mormon movement. Finally, there are private sources. The series of letters from James E. McNutt to Mollie, his mother, as he went west to Utah in the 1890s; the bit of information from a family remembrance about how Deborah Morey dressed a wound or what made John Keown angry; the tape-recorded interviews of Manly Amulek Boothe, Lew Moffet, Austin Cowles, and Miriam Echols; the pages of the Robinson family bible; and James Alexander McNutt's accounting ledger.

From these three types of sources and patience and time and the generosity of others who shared their knowledge, the letters began to become understandable. With the untiring hard work and expertise of my good friend Mark Pence, the manuscript was designed and prepared for printing. The people of the letters began to emerge from their pages—human beings, not just names; lives, not just dates. With this publication is the hope that, in the imaginations of its readers, these very real people will live again.

Gary C. Vitale
Springfield, Illinois
December, 2002

NOTES

1. Though members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints do not now like to be referred to as Mormons, during those early days, as the letters attest, they did identify themselves with that term. Since 1999 they prefer to be called the Community of Christ, though they still recognize Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) as an official designation.

2. Being more respecters of paper than words, the farmhouse mice have been rather strict redactors, sometimes excising whole pages. Wherever logic could replace the missing words, they have been replaced; otherwise, missing portions are noted in the letters as they occur.

3. Note that the extra "to meeting" was not deleted, nor was "give" corrected to "gave." All this, to preserve the flavor of Louisa's language.

4. Estate Records of Asa D. Works, Adams County, Illinois, filed January 21, 1852.

5. *History of Adams County, Illinois 1879* (Chicago: Murray, Williamson, and Phelps, 1879) p. 424-5.