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Presented by:

Dr. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

Juanita Brooks, Caroline Crosby, and
The Murder of Olivia Coombs



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THE JUANITA BROOKS LECTURE SERIES

PRESENTS

THE 38TH ANNUAL LECTURE

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DIXIE STATE UNIVERSITY

Juanita Brooks, Caroline Crosby, and The Murder of Olivia Coombs

By: Dr. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich



Juanita Brooks

Juanita Brooks was a professor at [then] Dixie College for many years and became a well-known author. She is recognized, by scholarly consensus, to be one of Utah's and Mormondom's most eminent historians. Her total honesty, unwavering courage, and perceptive interpretation of fact set more stringent standards of scholarship for her fellow historians to emulate. Dr. Obert C. and Grace Tanner had been lifelong friends of Mrs. Brooks and it was their wish to perpetuate her work through this lecture series. Dixie State University and the Brooks family express their thanks to the Tanner family.



Dr. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

Dr. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is 300th Anniversary University Professor emerita at Harvard University. She is probably best known for *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for History and many other awards in 1991. Others know her for a sentence that escaped from one of her scholarly articles to become a popular slogan. She explored that phenomenon in *Well-behaved Women Seldom Make History* (2007).

Her most recent book, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870* explores the paradoxical link between the practice of polygamy or "plural marriage"

in Utah Territory and the adoption in 1870 of women suffrage. Because of its use of braided stories drawn from early women's and men's diaries it received the 2017 Evan Biography Award from the Mountain West Century at Utah State University.

Her 2001 book *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* explored the social and cultural history of early New England through examination of a dozen household objects, including Indian trade baskets, a painted cupboard, a niddy-noddy, and an unfinished stocking. She further explored material history in *Tangible Things: Making History Through Objects* (2015), co-authored with Ivan Gaskell, Sara Schechner, and Sarah Anne Carter.

Dr. Ulrich has received numerous awards for teaching, scholarship, and public service, including a MacArthur Fellowship, the Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Award from the Society of American Historians, and the Charles Frankel Award (now the National Humanities Medal). She is past president of the American Historical Association and an elected member of the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She continues to write, lecture, and consult with museums and historical societies nationwide.

Juanita Brooks, Caroline Crosby, and The Murder of Olivia Coombs

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INTRODUCTION

This is a story about a long-forgotten murder, but it is not a whodunit. George Wood, admitted that he killed Olivia Coombs.¹ He did it in an old house in Cedar City, Utah on July 28, 1862. At trial he pled guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. That might have been the end of the story. But less than three years later, Utah's governor, responding to a petition signed by two hundred of the territory's male citizens, granted Wood a full and complete pardon. He returned to his previous life as a pioneering ironworker, successful farmer and merchant. He died in Cedar City in 1908 at the age of 85. Today his log cabin, memorialized in 1928 by the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, holds a place of honor in Cedar City's Frontier Homestead State Park as the "fifth oldest structure still standing in Utah."²

I would like to acknowledge the generosity of Barbara Jones Brown and Melanie Sturgeon, each of whom shared important insights and documents from their own research. Sturgeon will soon publish an article on the life and death of Olivia Coombs.

¹ Her name appears in various forms on genealogical sites, often as "Olive Olivia," apparently an attempt to reconcile two forms of her name used in period sources. I have chosen to refer to her by the name that appears on the California Censuses of 1850 and 1852, the Utah Census of 1860, and at Ancestry.com.

² Janet Burton Seegmiller, *A History of Iron County: Community Above Self* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1998), 50, 98, 193, 224, 238; Inez S. Cooper and Zelia B. Matheson, "First Home of Cedar Families," *Spectrum*, Cedar Birthday Supplement, Nov. 6, 1980; Frontier Homestead State Park Museum.

For Olivia Coombs there was no such redemption. The daughters she brought with her to Utah in 1858 grew up in the homes of strangers, their memories of their mother surviving only in the rippled recollections of their descendants. In 1926, one of those descendants, Olive Branch Millburn, composed a sketch of her mother's life that offered a little basic information about her grandmother without saying anything at all about the murder.³

Sometime thereafter, she gave a very different story to Juanita Brooks, who gave the murder a small place in history by including Millburn's account in a footnote to *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*. Millburn thought her grandmother had been killed because she had been too curious about the massacre.

She had come to Cedar City, a widow with two small daughters, and set up a school there. She acted too interested in this incident, asked too many questions about it. Word went out that she was collecting evidence and planned to publish her findings. At a small hotel next door, men gathered to visit and drink. One morning she was being discussed there as a wolf in sheep's clothing, pretending to teach their children while she tried to fasten crimes on their parents. In the crowd was George Wood. He had been drinking, and became much excited by the talk. When someone suggested that his son was

³ "Ella Coombs Branch, Written by Mrs. Olive Millburn March 10, 1926, in Olive Branch Millburn, *A History, Diary and Genealogy of William Henry Branch, Sr.* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.): 79-80. Millburn said that her grandmother died in Cedar City in September 1863.

interested in her thirteen-year-old daughter, he stalked out, went to the door of the house adjoining, opened it, and shot the mother twice before the crowd realized what had happened.

Millburn believed that “though Wood was cut off from the church he was never brought to civil trial.”⁴

When William Rees Palmer, a respected local historian, criticized Brooks for failing to mention Wood’s trial and pardon, she apologized: “The Wood story I gave just as it was told to me. This I should not have done. I should at least have looked up the court case and trial.” In the 1962 edition of the book, she added to the already long footnote a brief reference to the trial and pardon, citing records found in files at the Utah State Historical Society.⁵ But she did not elaborate, perhaps because she believed Millburn’s claim that Wood was somehow linked to massacre even though some of the details in court records undercut other elements in Millburn’s account.

Nor did anyone else pick up on the story. There was little incentive to do so. Although Mountain Meadow Massacre received positive reviews from scholars, neither church leaders nor the general public had much interest in a work that exposed one of the darkest moments in the state’s history, let alone an obscure murder that may or may not have had some relation to it. In 1953, Millburn included her 1926 sketch of her mother’s life in in a comprehensive history of her father’s

⁴ Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1950), 136 n4.

⁵ Juanita Brooks to William Palmer, St. George, August 14, 1952 in Craig S. Smith, *The Selected Letters of Juanita Brooks* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019), 147; Juanita Brooks, *Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 164-165 n4.

family published by the Utah Genealogical Society. Her younger sister, Evelyn Keller, also ignored the murder in brief history of the Coombs family that appeared in one of Kate B. Carter's collections of pioneer biographies.⁶

Although Carter was well-known for purging "offensive" material from the books that she edited, she was not alone in favoring stories that sustained affirming images of Utah's pioneers. Even Palmer, who knew that many Iron County men had participated in or helped cover up the Massacre, encouraged a descendant of one of the perpetrators to emphasize "the greater, better side" of his ancestor's life.⁷ In 1943 Palmer delivered a radio address on the life of George Wood that led with testimonials from men who remembered Wood's kindness and generosity to the poor. Palmer did not mention the murder.⁸

By the time Brooks died in 1989, historical practice in Utah as in other parts of the United States had begun to change. Once dismissed as a housewife or a near apostate, Brooks was now celebrated for her work. By the

⁶ Millburn, *A History, Diary and Genealogy of William Henry Branch, Sr.* A handwritten note on the front cover of a copy now in the Family History Library is marked: "Gift: Author Mar, 1953"; Irene Branch Keller, "The Coombs Family," *Our Pioneer Heritage*, vol. 3, ed. Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughter of the Utah Pioneers, 1960), 522-524.

⁷ On attitudes toward controversial stories, see Levi S. Peterson, *Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press) pp. 114, 184-185.

⁸ The text was recently published online in a blog post. I haven't yet tracked down the original. See Anne Laemmien Lewis, "George Lymer Wood, Baptized by Theodore Thurley 8 June 1840 in England," *Ann's Stories*, June 8, 2018, <https://annlaemmlenlewis1.wordpress.com/2018/06/08/george-lymer-wood-baptized-by-theodore-turley-8-june-1840-in-england/>

end of the twentieth-century, a revival of interest in the Massacre, stimulated in part by the activism of descendants, produced a rash of articles, books, television shows, movies, memorials, websites, and commemorations that eventually transformed the site of the murders into a National Historical Monument. The annual meeting of the Mountain Meadows Massacre Association held in St. George in 2014 featured a “Remembrance and Reconciliation” quilt created by descendants of both victims and perpetrators.⁹

This new focus on what had once been an untouchable topic in Utah history stimulated the rediscovery of Olivia Coombs’ story. In 2002, her great-great-grandson Clayton J. Wray identified himself in an on-line forum for Mountain Meadows Massacre descendants as a descendant of a person killed in what he called “The Second Murder in Iron County.”¹⁰ In 2012, Richard H. Bullock published an on-line history of the Coombs family that included excerpts from Wray’s work, transcriptions of trial documents, and an array of family stories. Participants in popular genealogical websites soon took notice, memorializing Olivia Coombs as a brilliant teacher and devoted

⁹ Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley, Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), ix-xii; Cynthia Gurney, “Epilogue to a Massacre,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 17, 1990, B1, B4; David DeMille, “Mountain Meadows Reconciliation Highlighted by Quilt,” *The Spectrum*, St. George, Utah, Sept. 8, 2014, www.thespectrum.com.

¹⁰ Clayton Wray comment, July 20, 2002, Mountain Meadows Association Archived Guest Book, www.mtn-meadows-assoc.com. For his discussion of the murder, see Clayton Wray, “The Story of the Second Murder in Iron County, Utah. Olive Olivia Curtis Coombs.” 2002. MS 18990. LDS Church History Library. According to online obituaries, Wray died in 2006 at the age of 81.

mother, identifying George Wood as a murderer, excoriating his pardon as a “travesty of justice.”¹¹

As far as I know none of these genealogists has yet discovered the rich material on Olivia Coombs life in the diary of Caroline Barnes Crosby, a source that was immensely useful to me when I was working on my 2017 book on early Mormon women.¹² In a chapter on Crosby’s life in San Bernardino, I briefly mentioned Olivia Coombs.¹³ This essay gives me an opportunity to explore more of her story.

I will begin with a close reading of documents related to the murder, then turn backward a few years in time to explore Crosby’s account of Olivia’s life in California and Utah. I will conclude by returning to Juanita Brooks’ footnote, not only assess Millburn’s claim that her grandmother’s murder was connected to the massacre, but to explore her own and sister’s excision of the murder from their other accounts of the

¹¹ Richard H. Bullock, *Ship Brooklyn Saints: Their Journey and Early Endeavors in California*. Sandy, Utah: no pub). Bullock’s book received a short notice in the *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 174-176, with a note that Volume 2 was available on-line at www.shipbrooklyn.com. Although that link has now expired, a typescript labeled “The Ship Brooklyn Story—Volume 2—The Coombs Family” along with variants of the same material can be found at familysearch.org under Olive Olivia Curtis Coombs tree/person/memories, and in other genealogical websites, including Find A Grave.

¹² *No Place to Call Home: The 1807-1857 Life Writings of Caroline Barnes Crosby*, ed. Edward Leo Lyman, Susan Ward Payne, and S. George Ellsworth (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press 2005). The manuscript, including a typescript of the unpublished section, is held by the Utah Historical Society. In this paper, I will use the labels *CBC* to refer to the published portion and *CBC typescript* to refer to a transcription of the unpublished part held at the Utah Historical Society.

¹³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 319-320.

family history. My focus here will not be the murder itself but its unfolding meaning in the century that followed.

History is always a dialogue between present and past, between the assumptions and experiences a historian brings to her project and the documents she is able to recover. Olivia Coombs history is a story about the unfolding of a family tragedy within the chaotic landscape of western migration. It is also a story about issues of social justice that still resonate today as Americans try to come to terms with the way violent events expose previously unseen twists and turns in ordinary lives. My goal is not to fix blame for Olivia's murder but to more fully understand how the parallel story of the massacre at Mountain Meadows shaped efforts to give her a place in history.

THE CONFESSION, TRIAL, AND PARDON OF GEORGE WOOD

Historical records affirm two elements in Millburn's account of her grandmother's murder—that she was a newcomer to Cedar City in 1862 and that she had several daughters. Those daughters in ascending order were Olive, age 6, Elvira, age 7, Arabella, age 10, and Emily who, contrary to Millburn's recollection, was 16. They also acknowledge the existence of two other children, Charles Marion, 22, and Helen, age 20, who remained in California when their parents came to Utah. Their mother was 44 years old in 1862. There is no evidence that she came to Cedar City to set-up a school.¹⁴

In a letter to Brigham Young, written nine days after the

¹⁴ I base these ages on the census records cited in note 1 above and on confirming information in Crosby's diary. I have not found extant birth records for the children.

murder, Cedar City's bishop, Henry Lunt, attempted to describe what happened. He explained that on the morning of July 28, 1862 as he was at work grinding his scythe, George Wood's daughter came to his house to say her father wanted to see him. Thinking there was sickness in the family, Lunt hastened to the Wood house. Wood's wife, Jane, invited him to sit in the parlor. Lunt wrote:

I guess I waited about 10 minutes before he came. He shut the door and told me that his son Joseph and a certain girl down in the Old Fort had committed adultery, and that the girl had seduced Joseph. He said that he had been told that morning by two women who told him that they saw them in the very act.

When Isaac Haight came into the room, Lunt asked Wood to repeat his story, which he did. He then got out of his chair as if "in a great hurry."

[Lunt] said, "Bro. Wood, don't be in a hurry, don't be rash, in the midst of counsel theirs [there is] safety." "Bishop," says he, "I don't ask for any counsel, neither am I going to take any. My mind is made up what to do."

He then stormed out of the room. The two men waited a minute, then went outside to investigate. When they learned Wood had mounted his horse and headed in the direction of the section of the town people still referred to as "the old fort," they raced after him.¹⁵

At this point in the letter, Lunt seems to have paused, concerned perhaps that Brigham Young might blame him

¹⁵ Henry Lunt to President Brigham Young, Cedar City, Iron County, August 6, 1862, Brigham Young Office files 1832-1878, Box 69, Fd. 13. LDS Church History Library, as quoted in Bullock, "The Ship Brooklyn Story - Volume 2 - The Coombs Family."

for not doing more to constrain an obviously angry man. He assured Young that although he and Haight had both noticed that Wood was wearing “leggings,” neither of them could see that he had a belt or a pistol, attached. They tried to catch up with him, but since he was on horseback and they on foot, the effort was hopeless. By the time they saw him approaching them from the opposite direction they knew that it was already too late. Wood made no effort to deny what he had done: “Bishop,” he said, “I have killed two women and I want you to see that they are buried and,” says he, ‘by the eternal Gods anyone who interferes with my family again, I will serve them in the same way.” Lunt told him he should give himself up to “Judge Smith.” Wood ignored him and rode on. They continued toward the fort. A small crowd had gathered around the house of Ezra Higby by the time they arrived. Olivia Coombs, the woman they knew as Higby’s wife, was lying on the floor in a pool of blood.¹⁶

The passive construction in the next section of Lunt’s letter suggests that he was drawing upon the coroner’s report rather than his own observations in his description of the body:

Upon examination it was found that she received a wound from a bullet entering her right thigh, about mid-way between her knee and hip, passing in the direction of her body, coming out of the groin and immediately entering the body just above the pubic bone in the region of the bladder. She also had two frightful wounds on her head, fracturing the skull in one place, caused by blows from the pistol. The daughter, a girl about 16, received also a bullet wound in her right thigh and four dangerous wounds

¹⁶ Ibid.

on her head by blows from the pistol, also fracturing the skull.¹⁷

The direction of the shots highlights the sexual charges Wood had made against the victims. Lunt's claim that the direction of the shots was caused by the position of the victims at the time of the crime makes little sense, although the claim that they were sitting on a "bed" [mattress] placed on the floor does suggest the makeshift nature of their lives at the time.

Lunt continued, "From the pistol, which I have now in my possession it appears that three charges were shot off, and two caps having got down forward of the hammer, the pistol would not revolve. He, being determined to kill them, beat them over the head with the pistol till he thought they were dead, and then left." Lunt added that another witness claimed Emily had managed to rise and flee the house after being shot but that Wood had recaptured her and battered her in the head.

Lunt then offered Young a summary of what he had learned about the victims. He identified Olivia as a sister to Theodore Curtis, a man whom Young would have known for his missionary service. After referring to Olivia as "Mrs Higby," Lunt then provided a summary of her marital history:

[S]he was formerly the wife of a man named Coombs and they came from California in 1858. She was again married to Solomon Chamberlane but lived with him a short time; she afterwards moved from Beaver to Santa Clara and was there married to Thomas Hunt, who I believe is now in Salt Lake City. This last spring she married again to Ezra Higby who is now in this place attending Bro. E. Snow's carding

¹⁷ Ibid.

machine.

He told Brigham Young he didn't think it necessary to share further details because the bearer of the letter, "Bro Stewart" could tell him more.¹⁸ Young probably didn't need further details in order to grasp the implications of Lunt's list.

Lunt concluded his letter with a sprightly claim "that all is in a prosperous condition, both spiritually and temporally in this Ward, it has been remarked of late by many that they never saw things more prosperous and flourishing than they are in Cedar. Our meetings are well attended and good day and Sunday Schools." With no apparent intention, he deftly excluded the perpetrator and the victim of the ghastly murder he had just described from Cedar City's flourishing community. He signed himself "Your humble brother In Christ."¹⁹

By the time Lunt sent his letter, the Iron County Probate Court had already convened a special session to hear depositions from witnesses and consider the results of the coroner's inquest. In the midst of emerging legal proceedings, George A. Smith, a church apostle with major responsibility for communities in southern Utah, wrote two letters crucial to our understanding of the case—the first to the accused murderer and the second to the judge who would preside at his trial. In the first, he addressed Wood as "Dear Brother." Although he reminded Wood that that his situation was "one of a very grave and serious character," he assured him that he had friends who would who would aid him. Without revealing what sort of aid those "friends" might render, he cautioned Wood "to keep cool and quiet," lest some act of his "inflame the public mind, or

¹⁸ Lunt to Young letter.

¹⁹ Ibid.

further jeopardize” his life. He signed himself a “Friend and Well Wisher.”²⁰

Smith was much more direct in the letter he wrote the same day to the judge, his cousin Silas Smith. He made two suggestions, that the court postpone the trial until September and “in the absence of a county jail” he granted Wood bail “on his giving ample security for his appearance.” He thought that from “two to five thousand dollars. . . would be sufficient.” He told Smith that he should feel free to tell others that he was acting “according to my counsel.” He ended by making Wood’s insinuations against Olivia explicit: “I think the killing of such a whore benefits the community enough to render the caseailable.”²¹ Notice how over the course of nine days, Wood’s awkward charge of “adultery” between two teenagers and his claim that Olivia’s daughter had “seduced” his son had become a full-blown claim that the murdered mother was a “whore.”

There is no mention of any of these charges in the brief trial record. Although Judge Smith had postponed the trial and released Wood on bail, as his cousin George had suggested, he was firm in pronouncing sentence. Wood was to be taken to the state penitentiary “to be confined to hard labor for life.” He added the pro forma coda: “May the example thus made be a warning to prevent others from the unlawful shedding of blood.”²² To all appearances, Judge Smith and the county’s grand jury made a serious attempt to hold Wood accountable

²⁰ George A. Smith to George Wood, 6 August 1862, Historian’s Office, letterpress copybooks, CR 10 38, vol. 2, p. 157. LDS Church History Library.

²¹ George A. Smith to Silas S. Smith, 6 August 1862, Historian’s Office, letterpress copybooks, CR 300 38. 2, p. 158. LDS Church History Library.

²² Iron County Probate Court, Special Session, July 30, 1862; Adjournment, Sept. 8, 1862, Sentencing, Sept. 9, 1862. Utah State Archives.

for his crime. Three months later, the annual report from the prison warden listed Wood among the four prisoners then in custody. Though he did perform labor, he appears to have spent little time in the prison itself. At one point he was actually assigned to work in Cedar City at the very iron factory he had helped found. Outsourcing prison labor was not unusual in this period. Prisons were notoriously inadequate and keeping people in confinement was expensive. But Wood appears to have been treated with a particularly gentle hand. In the end he served less than three years of a supposed lifetime sentence.²³

George A. Smith's involvement in arranging Wood's pardon is obvious. The prosecuting attorney created a draft petition at his request, and he was the first signer on the final version. Perhaps in an effort to reassure Utah's federally appointed governor, the petition began by pointing out procedural violations in the conduct of the trial, noting that there had been "a number of dilatory pleadings, out of term time," that Wood had "no professional advisor" when he pled guilty, and that the court failed to empanel "a Traverse Jury" or "examine witnesses."²⁴ But in describing the crime it cast

²³ "Legislative Proceedings," *Deseret News*, December 17, 1862. On the general practice during this period see Rebecca M. McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment: Protest, Politics, and the Making of the American Penal States, 1776-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 84-86. It is clear from the language of the 13th Amendment that convict labor was a common practice. Otherwise there would have been no reason to except it from the general rule against involuntary servitude, but Melanie Sturgeon in her forthcoming article has compared Wood's with other Utah prisoners during this period and confirms that his punishment was light.

²⁴ Edward Dalton to Geo. A. Smith, March 23, 1864 in JH March 23, 1864, p. 1 citing to History of Brigham Young, 1864, p. 187.

aspersions on the character of the victim, claiming that she had “for some time previously kept a house of ill fame in the town of Beaver, and that just before the aforesaid occurrence, had established a similar place to decoy away youth, in the town of Cedar, in Iron County.” It went on to argue:

That the forenamed Olive Higbee did entice, and by the aid of her daughter, who was also engaged in the same disreputable business, beguile and lead away his (the said Wood’s) son, a boy of eighteen years, for wicked and adulterous purposes, and that upon information to that effect being supplied to the aforesaid George Wood, he in the heat of passion, did pursue the said Olive Higbee, keeping the house of ill fame, and did shoot at her with a revolving pistol, the effect of which shot did on the day following cause her death.²⁵

Both the emphasis on seduction and the claim that the crime was done in the heat of passion relate to the concept of “mountain common law” as promulgated by George A. Smith in a landmark case from the early 1850s in which a man was acquitted for killing his wife’s supposed seducer.²⁶

In a passionate defense of that acquittal, Smith had exclaimed, “The principle, the only one, that beats and throbs through the heart of the entire inhabitants of this territory, is simply this: The man who seduces his neighbor’s wife must die, and her nearest relative must kill him!”²⁷ Although Smith

²⁵ Governor James Duane Doty, Utah Territorial Papers, Film A-702, record number 2091 and 2092. Utah State Archives.

²⁶ Kenneth L. Cannon II, “‘Mountain Common Law’: The Extralegal Punishment of Seducers in Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 51, no.4 (1983): 308-327.

²⁷ *Deseret Evening News*, November 15, 1851, cited in Cannon, “Mountain Common Law,” pp. 312, 313.

gave it a local label, that notion did not originate in Utah nor in Mormonism. It was a version of a so-called “unwritten law” that, though built on a string of ancient precedents, was especially prominent in the United States and in Britain in the nineteenth century. What was unusual about Wood’s case was the sex of his victim. In most such cases, the chosen target was a male seducer of a man’s wife or daughter.²⁸ Wood’s remarkable claim that his eighteen-year-old son had been seduced by a younger girl is astonishing except that his own language and that of the petition for his pardon so closely reflect the terms in which contemporaries defined crimes susceptible to acquittal or pardon under the “unwritten law.”²⁹

These cases not only addressed supposed violations of sexual order but assaults on male honor.³⁰ Wood highlighted the importance of honor when, in confessing the murder, he told Lunt that he would treat anyone in the same way who attempted to interfere with his family. He claimed to be addressing the crime of adultery, but he was also reaffirming his own authority not just over his son, but over a presumed disorder in the community, a disorder that he associated with a woman powerful enough to “beguile” his son. That term came straight out of the verse in Genesis where Adam defended his

²⁸ K. J. Kesselring, “No Greater Provocation? Adultery and the Mitigation of Murder,” *Law and History Review* 34, no. 1 (2016): 199-225.

²⁹ Although Olive Millburn claimed that Wood was by a reference to his son’s involved with Olivia’s “thirteen-year-old” daughter, Lunt described her as sixteen. Census records appear to affirm Lunt’s claim. Emily was probably born in 1846, about six weeks after the arrival of her parents in San Francisco on the *Ship Brooklyn*.

³⁰ This theme is powerfully developed in Carolyn Strange, “The Unwritten Law of Executive Justice: Pardoning Patricide in Reconstruction-era New York,” *Law and History Review* 28, no. 4 (November 2010): 891-930.

partaking of the forbidden fruit by blaming the woman God had given him. Kenneth Cannon has suggested that Latter-day Saint appeals to “mountain common law” were directed at outsider’s portrayals of plural marriage as a violation of female purity.³¹ This case is a rare example of someone using that defense not to defend female purity but to punish female duplicity.

The reverse side of nineteenth-century celebrations of female purity was a deeply grounded mistrust of female sexuality, a theme that played out in contradictory portrayals of prostitutes in sensational murder cases. The 1836 trial of Richard Robinson direct him to a sink of pollution in our neighborhood where he might do the public some service in this line.”³²

There has been little scholarship on prostitution in Utah, perhaps because most historians assume that, in contradistinction to other western territories, there was little of it.³³ But there was a lot of anxiety in Utah in the 1850s over the presence of American troops, some of whom delighted in portraying Utah women as rushing into soldiers’ arms to escape

³¹ See note above and revised version of Cannon’s essay in the 2021 spring edition of *Utah Historical Quarterly*, which includes three essays on later uses of the “unwritten” law to defend women accused of murdering a seducer.

³² Patricia Cline Cohen, *Murder of Helen Jewett*, (New York: Knopf, 1998), 302. Also see Cohen, “The Helen Jewett Murder: Violence, Gender, and Sexual Licentiousness in Antebellum America,” *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 374-389. On the contrast between romanticized images of western prostitutes as independent women and the difficulties of their lives see Melanie Sturgeon, ““Belgian Jennie” Bauers: Mining Town Madam,” *The Journal of Arizona History* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 349-374

³³ Jeffrey D. Nichols, “Polygamy and Prostitution: Comparative Morality in Salt Lake City, 1847-1911,” *Journal of Mormon History* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 1-39.

plural marriage.³⁴ In a town like Beaver, where the Bishop held frequent disciplinary councils and shut down dances not approved by the church, it is hard to imagine the existence of anything as formal as a brothel, but no amount of surveillance could have totally prevented sexual encounters among teenagers or discouraged a desperate woman from trading sexual favors for food, sewing services, or alcohol. One need not assume that Olivia Coombs and her daughters were guilty of any of these things to recognize that something in her behavior or circumstances allowed Utah authorities to transform Wood's crime into her shame.

The diary of Caroline Crosby offers a rich description of Olivia's circumstances in California and Utah before the murder and a few clues about her behavior.

CAROLINE CROSBY AND "SIS. COMBS"

Diarists live in the moment, recording events one after another, a day at a time. Names dropped in a single entry may or may not return. Only a few encounters turn into full-fledged stories. Caroline's encounters with Olivia did become a story, though not a story about a murder, a story about a woman married to a much older man, a woman who had too many children, even though she loved them all, a woman struggling to make sense of her life and the choices available.

Caroline's patient accounting of family life among Latter-day Saints in San Francisco, San Bernardino, and Beaver portrays the miseries of monogamy as well as the trials of

³⁴ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Runaway Wives, 1830-1860," *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 2 (April 2016): 1-26.

polygamy. In San Francisco, she attended church with Eleanor McLean, a respectable wife and mother who fled her alcoholic husband to become Parley Pratt's ninth wife. In San Bernardino, Caroline testified in a contentious divorce trial between Mary Hamilton and Quartus Sparks, a one-time church leader who lived openly with a prostitute. In Beaver, she comforted a weeping mother who had no breastmilk for her newborn baby and whose husband went to the stockyard to sleep to get away from its crying. The distraught women who shared their stories with Caroline suffered from anxiety, depression, abuse, discontent, and sheer exhaustion as they struggled to hold life together in a seemingly endless succession of makeshift settings.³⁵

Caroline's own wandering extended the geography of early Mormon history. She and her husband, Jonathan, joined the Latter-day Saints in Kirtland, Ohio, where their only child, a son named Alma, was born. They made-do in Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa before joining a wagon train to the Salt Lake Valley where they hoped to settle. In 1850, they responded to a call from Brigham Young to join Caroline's sister Louisa and her husband Addison Pratt on a mission to French Polynesia. After eighteen months in Tubaii [Society Islands], they returned to the San Francisco Bay area, where they first encountered Olivia Coombs. Olivia had done her own wandering, from her birthplace in Connecticut to Long Island, where she and two siblings became Latter-day Saints, and then in 1846 with her husband Abraham and three children to California on the ship

³⁵ Ulrich, *House Full of Females*, 322-327; Ulrich, "Runaway Wives."; CBC typescript, 838 (Aug. 16, 1859).

Brooklyn.³⁶

Olivia first appeared in Caroline's diary on July 18, 1855. It had been a busy day for Caroline with a string of visitors coming to the house, most of them on their way from one place to another. The last to arrive was "sister Coombs from Napa with her little girl and infant baby." The baby was surely Elvira, born four months before in Napa. "I gave them a little dinner and they left in search of Sister Woodbury," Caroline continued, referring to her cousin Elvira Stevens Woodbury by her married name. Little Elvira Coombs was about to meet her namesake, a twenty-three-year-old woman who had already had more trials and adventures than most women have in a lifetime.³⁷ Orphaned on the overland trail, she had married at eighteen, spent a year in the Sandwich Islands with her missionary husband, and was now struggling to support herself in San Francisco while waiting for him to rejoin her so they could return to Utah.³⁸

"Sister C said she had promised to let her little girl go through to the valley with sister Woodbury," Caroline wrote. Given the rigors of such a journey, Olivia's "little girl" is more likely to have been Helen, age 12, or Emily, age 9, than Arabella, age 3.³⁹ Olivia explained that she and the rest of her

³⁶ Ulrich, *House Full of Females*, 312-315, 13, 221; *No Place to Call Home*, ed. Lyman, Payne, and Ellsworth, 17, 28-32.

³⁷ See "Elvira Stevens Barney" in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, churchhistorianspress.org. and in August Joyce Corcheron, *Representative Women of Deseret* (Salt Lake City, J.C. Graham, 1884), <https://www.gutenberg.org/50958>.

³⁸ Technically, I think she was Carline's "first cousin once removed." Elvira's father was Caroline's first cousin. See "Family of Joseph Stevens and Dolly Sawyer," CBC, 12.

³⁹ The 1852 Census for Napa, California lists Emily, age 6. On April 22, 1857, CBC 456, Caroline referred to Emily as 10.

family planned to leave soon for San Bernardino, the newly established Mormon colony in southern California. Although this was the first time Caroline had met Olivia, the two women had a connection. In the 1840s, Jonathan Crosby had operated a carpentry shop with Ross Ransom Rogers, whose wife Helen was Olivia's younger sister. The Rogers were now living in Utah.⁴⁰ The Crosbys also knew Olivia's older brother Theodore Curtis, who had recently come to San Francisco from Salt Lake City to serve a mission. Theodore's wife, Margaret, a skilled seamstress had set up a "sewing shop" where she sometimes employed church members.⁴¹

On September 15, 1855, Caroline described an interesting encounter at Sunday meeting between Olivia's friend Elvira Woodbury and her brother Theodore. This must have been a "testimony meeting" where members spoke when moved by the spirit. In Caroline's account, Brother Curtis "threw out some insinuations, which sister Woodbury thought applicable to herself, and accordingly replied to them." A third speaker then "qualified some of his sayings" and a fourth man "bore testimony that he believed they had spoken by the spirit of God." Although it is impossible to know the nature of Theodore's "insinuations," Elvira obviously knew how to speak for herself. At the time she was in deep distress after learning

⁴⁰ As Caroline became better acquainted with Olivia, she occasionally added her own letters to those Olivia sent Rogers in Utah CBC, "Memoir," 54-55, 513 n24, and diary references, 398, 451 (April 1 1856, February 14, 1857).

⁴¹ References to Sister Curtis and her sewing operation are on p. 347-348 (August 29, 1855). Also see the reference to "T. Curtis. Sewing Factory. 145 Sansome," in Bogardus and Labatt, San Francisco City Directory, 1856, at <https://archive.org/details/sanfranciscocity1856harr/page/40>, and for the 1851 journey Dr. Margaret Roberts, a biography. Typescript. Unknown author. FamilySearch <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/memories/KWJH-ZLK>

that her older sister, Jane Lewis, had just died of consumption in San Bernardino.⁴²

Caroline's diary is filled with fleeting glimpses of such encounters. Names move in and out of the diary as people carry their stories from one Mormon enclave to another. Elvira and John Woodbury, soon left for San Bernardino as did Olivia and Abraham Coombs and their children. In November 1855, the Crosbys followed. They were not surprised to find Olivia at the Woodbury house on January 1, 1856 when they arrived for a New Year's Day visit. When they paid a visit to the Woodbury's house in San Bernardino, they found Olivia there.⁴³

San Bernardino, founded in 1851 under the direction of Apostles Amasa Lyman and Charles Rich, was meant to be the last link in a chain of settlements leading from Salt Lake City to the Pacific. Initially settled by families from Salt Lake City, it quickly acquired a mildly cosmopolitan cast as returning missionaries and converts from Australia, various islands in the Pacific, and south Asia passed through. Outside the reach of Utah law, the town sheltered Saints who chafed against authority or who lacked the resources or faith to complete their journey to Zion. There was constant movement in and out of the town.

On April 1, Caroline helped Elvira Woodbury finish a wagon cover in preparation for their journey to Utah. "We had a social time," Caroline began, then ended on a somber note. "She told me some things which made me feel sad and caused me to marvel." That comment foreshadowed news Elvira sent from Salt Lake City two months later: "she had been to bro.

⁴² CBC, 343, 345, 347, 351 (August 10, 17, 21, 28, September 22, 1855).

⁴³ CBC 346, 369, 380 (Oct. 3, 4, and November 17, 1855, January 1, 1856)

Young and got released from her husband.” In early Utah, divorce was readily available to women, a response not only to outside charges about the oppression of women under polygamy, but also related to the radical notion that mutual compatibility was essential to marriage. Caroline affirmed the finality of the divorce when she referred to Elvira as “[Sister] Woodberry, or rather Stevens.”⁴⁴

By autumn, Helen Coombs had begun working for Caroline as a household helper. On December 16, 1856, she brought news that her mother “had got an addition of another daughter to her family. Which makes her five in number, and only one son.” Helen, Emily, Arabella, and Elvira had a new sister named Olive. Their only brother, Charles Marion, had remained in Napa when the family moved.⁴⁵

When baby Olive was only two months old, Olivia told Caroline she was thinking of going to the mountains to cook for the men at the sawmill. A month later Olivia affirmed that she was thinking of leaving her husband, Caroline advised her against it.⁴⁶ The reasons aren’t hard to imagine. It was one thing for a young and childless woman like Elvira Stevens to become single again. But Olivia was in a totally different situation. Although divorce was available in California, the process was adversarial and without any guarantee that a wife would get custody of her children. Olivia may in fact have worked for a

⁴⁴ CBC 400, 412 (April 1, June 22, 1856). The variant spelling of Elvira’s name is in the original.

⁴⁵ CBC, 430, 435, 438, 441, 448, 449 (October 20, 26, November 23, December 16, 1856, January 19, 26, 27, February 1, 1857). On Charles Marion Coombs see Bullock, “The Ship Brooklyn – Volume 2 – The Coombs Family.”

⁴⁶ CBC, 450, 456, 457 (February 11, March 22, 1857).⁴⁷ CBC, 456, 457, 458 (March 23, 29, 30, 31, April 1, 1857).

time in lumber camps in northern California shortly after their arrival and before her younger children were born, but she now had five daughters to support. Caroline may or may not have told her all this, but she was no doubt fully capable of figuring it out for herself.

Olivia's discussion with Caroline seems to have deepened her despair. The next day Helen returned from a brief visit home to report an unfolding disaster. When Caroline reached the Coombs' house, she found Olivia "prostrate on the bed, her babe crying by her side" with three little girls "standing around, looking very sad and forsaken." Caroline "seized the babe and the one next to it and brought them home," telling Emily to take care of Arabella and come to her house if they got hungry. From that point on, without any kind of formal arrangement, Caroline became the emergency back-up for the Coombs family. A few days later "immediately after breakfast" Emily came to the house with little Elvira, saying "her mother sent her to me to get her breakfast, as they had nothing but bread and water for her."⁴⁷

It is impossible to know whether the lack of food in the house was caused by Abraham's difficulty earning enough to support them, or Olivia's inability to function. When Caroline offered to take Elvira full-time and "do a mothers part by her," both parents appeared to consent. Caroline had fostered many children in the recent past, both in Tubaii and in California. She was obviously disappointed in not having been able to have more children. She was delighted when Elvira seemed happy and "ate heartily." She was even more pleased when her

⁴⁷ CBC, 456, 457, 458 (March 23, 29, 30, 31, April 1, 1857).

friends “admired my babe much,” but Olivia and Abraham were obviously more divided over the situation than Caroline knew. In hindsight, Abraham’s statement that “he thought that if they separated that he should put them all out” seems like a not-so-veiled threat that if Caroline left him she would lose all her children. Caroline should have known that trouble was coming when Olivia sent a note asking Helen to bring Elvira home because Arabella, who was ill, wanted to see her. Arabella got better, but a local physician told Caroline that when he went to the house to treat her, he “found the mother in a state of intoxication.”⁴⁸

Through April, both Elvira and Helen continued to live with the Crosbys. On May 15, 1857 Olivia sent a note saying that she and Abraham expected to leave soon for northern California and wanted to take all of their children with them. On paper she sounded decisive, but she came to the house to discuss her decision Caroline thought she “appeared much dejected and sad.” She admitted that Elvira was probably better off with Caroline than with her, yet said she was “very unhappy without her.” She didn’t know what to do. Caroline told her “to pray and get the mind of the Lord on the matter.” Olivia said she had never done that and had been mostly driven “by her impulse.” With a bit of nudging, she agreed to leave Elvira in Caroline’s care for another day while she considered her decision. Helen soon informed Caroline that her mother gone home, sent Emily to the store for “a bottle of brandy.” and had begun drinking.⁴⁹

At that point, Jonathan Crosby stepped in. He asked

⁴⁸ CBC, 457, 458, 460 (March 23, April 2, 4, 7, 14, 1857).

⁴⁹ CBC, 466-467 (May 15, 16, 1857).

Abraham to come to the house. When Jonathan asked him how his wife was, he responded “bad enough.” Abraham explained that in order “to make reconciliation” with his wife, he had given her permission to bring Elvira home, but that her behavior “worried him so that he did not know what course to pursue.” Jonathan told him he needed to make up his mind. Unless he was willing to bind Elvira to the Crosbys, they did not wish to keep her any longer. The next day, Olivia sent another note. She told Helen to bring her sister home after breakfast but that she herself could stay until they left for Upper California.” Jonathan Crosby had had enough. He told Helen that she too had to make a decision. She could stay with the Crosbys after her parents left or she could leave immediately. Helen chose to leave. When she came back with Emily to pick up her clothing, Caroline made one last attempt to rescue Elvira and her baby sister. She gave Helen and Emily “both a charge to be kind to their little sisters and take good care of them when their mother was in her helpless state, and always speak gently to one another.” When they left, Caroline admitted that she felt relieved.⁵⁰

Over the next two years, she did not mention the Coombs family in her diary. On January 1, 1858, the Crosbys joined the migration to southern Utah. They lived for several months near Cedar City, then in November 1858 moved north to Beaver.⁵¹ What happened to the Coombs family during that period is difficult to determine. Family histories say they went north to visit family members in Napa, California and then

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ CBC, 508 (January 1, 1858); CBC typescript, 788.

took separate routes to Utah in 1860, but public records show that Olivia was in Beaver well before that. On August 25, 1858, she filed a petition for divorce with Beaver County Probate Court., echoing the language of Utah's liberal divorce statute by claiming that her feelings were "entirely alienated from Mr. Combs," that she could not "have peace and union with him," and that her "welfare requires a separation." Three days later the probate judge granted the petition, giving Olivia custody of her children, all the "household furniture," and half of a wheat crop then standing in the ground.⁵² There is no way of knowing where Abraham was at the time. Family sources as well as contemporary records say he died shortly after reaching Beaver, but there is no surviving record of when and how.

Olivia was probably attracted to Beaver because her sister and brother-in-law, Helen and Ross Rogers, were living there.⁵³ The Crosbys also found the presence their "old friend R R Rogers" his family appealing. Caroline was delighted by "the variety of reading matter" available at Rogers house because of Ross's appointment as postmaster. But though the newspapers and periodicals that passed through his hands gave her welcome access to news from abroad, she said nothing in her diary about receiving news about Olivia and her children from Helen.⁵⁴

⁵² Many thanks to Melanie Sturgeon for sharing this source: Olivia Combs vs Abraham Combs, pp. 7-8, Beaver County Probate Court Record Books, Utah State Archives, Series 17893, Reel 1.

⁵³ Martha Sonntag Bradley, *A History of Beaver County*, (Utah State Historical Society and Beaver County Commission: 1999), 51, 66; Juanita Brooks, Mountain Meadow Massacre, 115-116.

⁵⁴ CBC typescript, 789, 803, 805, 816 (November 19, 1858, January 18, February 1, April 7, 1859).

Caroline first mentioned Olivia in her diary on April 17, 1859, when Jonathan passed on disturbing information he had heard from church leaders after Sunday meeting. That evening Ross Rogers visited the Crosby house to continue that conversation. He asked the Crosbys “whether we would take the child again, we once had given to us by bro Combs, now deceased; that he expected they would be under necessity of taking them from their mother, in consequence of her evil habits, and bind them out.” If Ross told them about the divorce, Caroline did not mention it. Nor did she describe the nature of those “evil habits.” When Jonathan told Caroline the decision about taking Elvira was hers, she agreed to do so on the same condition they had agreed to in San Bernardino, that the placement would be legally affirmed.⁵⁵ Caroline recorded nothing at all about Olivia over the next six months. Presumably, she had once again rejected that demand.

In the meantime, Helen and Ross Rogers decided to leave Beaver and return to their old home in Provo. Jonathan traded a pair of oxen with Ross for two cows and some wheat. Caroline helped stitch a wagon cover, fried doughnuts, and baked mince pies and cookies for the journey. Their friends left “in good spirits,” Caroline wrote.⁵⁶ Helen and her husband may have offered moral support and practical help to her sister, and Olivia may have returned the favor in kind. But there is no evidence of that in Caroline’s diary. That invisibility contrasts with the interwoven mentions of Olivia in Caroline’s references to Elvira Woodbury in California as well as to the multiple

⁵⁵ CBC typescript, 818-819 (April 17, 1859).

⁵⁶ CBC typescript, 852-853 (November 21-28, 1859).

occasions in Beaver when a visit to one family resulted in notations on the presence of others.

Olivia reappeared in Caroline's diary in the winter and spring of 1860 as "Sister Chamberlain." Her new name confirms the claim Henry Lunt made in his letter to Brigham Young that Olivia was briefly married to Solomon Chamberlain. Chamberlain was a colorful figure in early Mormonism. An early convert and advocate for Joseph Smith, he was in the first company into the Salt Lake Valley, made a solo trip across the mountains to the gold mines in 1850, where Caroline and Jonathan briefly encountered him, and was part of the earliest incursions into southern Utah. He and his wife Teresa lived for a time in John D Lee's settlement at Harmony, but when he decided to move north to Beaver, she refused to accompany him and apparently asked for a divorce. She had probably already been living with Lee's other plural wives, when Apostle Amasa Lyman sealed her to him on March 19, 1859.⁵⁷ Caroline had only random connections with "Old Man Chamberlain, until May of that year when he invited her to milk his cow on shares, explaining he wasn't feeling well and would give her half the butter, if she would give him enough milk for himself and his young daughter, who appears to have been the only other inhabitant of his house. That arrangement only lasted for a few weeks. Either his health had improved or he had found someone else to milk his cows.⁵⁸

At that point, he pretty much disappeared from

⁵⁷ Juanita Brooks, *John Doyle Lee: Zealot, Pioneer, Builder, Scapegoat* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1992, orig. 1985), 235, 246;

⁵⁸ CBC typescript, 823-825 (May 18-27, 1859.)

Caroline's diary except for an occasional comment about Alma doing some work for him. There was little precedent therefore for Caroline's entry for February 23, 1860:

Sister Chamberlain called, and seemed in deep distress, wished to see Bro Crosby, said an evil and false report was in circulation about her, which made her feel very bad, said she wished to leave this place, as no one had any confidence in her here. Complained of her husband's treatment of her. &c.⁵⁹

Three months later, Caroline recorded a competing story from him:

Old Man Chamberlain. . . was in awhile entering grievous complaints against his wife Olivia. Stated that she had threatened his life, and actually struck him with a stick of wood on his head, causing blood to run freely. Said he had applied for a divorce from the county judge and would never live with her as a wife any more.⁶⁰

Although Caroline carefully recorded both complaints, she offered no judgment on either. Nor did she report on either threat to ask for a divorce.

A month later, Emily Coombs unexpectedly showed up at Caroline's house, asking "to borrow a book for her mother." Caroline gave her a copy of the Millennial Star. Since Caroline was herself well-known in the town as an avid reader of and sometime agent for illustrated eastern periodicals, that choice may have been a subtle hint that Olivia should pay more attention to church publications. Later that day, when an ailing

⁵⁹ CBC typescript, pp. 864-5 (February 23, 1860). CBC typescript, pp. 864-5 (February 23, 1860).

⁶⁰ CBC typescript, p. 872 (April 23, 1860).

neighbor asked Caroline to “try to get her a girl to wait on her,” she immediately sent word of the position to Emily Coombs “by Father Chamberlain.”⁶¹ Neither Emily nor her mother showed up again in person in Caroline’s diary.

The U.S. Census taken in Beaver on July 19, 1860 listed Olivia Coombs, age 42, “Washerwoman” with three daughters Arabella, 8, Elvira, 5, and Olivia, 4. There was no sign of Emily either there or in Chamberlain’s house which was in an entirely different part of town. In October, he killed a pig and brought the Crosbys a piece of fresh pork, then again disappeared from the diary until May 24, when Caroline wrote, “Father Chamberlain arrived from the south, came for the rest of the remainder of his things which he left behind when he moved from here.” That week she made multiple references to people coming and going from the new settlement at Santa Clara. Seven months later, nearly everything they had built was washed away in a cataclysmic flood. Caroline observed, in an uncharacteristic allusion to apocalyptic prophecy, “So we see the saints do not escape the judgements entirely that are coming on the earth.”⁶²

On August 2, 1862, Caroline received the chilling news of Olivia’s death. Perhaps because she had so seldom referred to her by her first name, she wrote “Gloria” rather than “Olivia.” The details she included mirror the indictment issued by the Grand Jury just three days before the murder. Significantly, she also mentioned Ezra Higby, a man Henry Lunt described as Olivia’s husband in the letter he sent to Brigham Young six days later.

⁶¹ CBC typescript, 877, (May 23, 24, 1860). On Caroline’s interest in eastern periodicals and her work as an agent, 829, 839, 843, 862.

⁶² CBC typescript, 893, 918, 959 (October 5, 1860; May 24, December 30, 1861).

News between Cedar City and Beaver had traveled fast.

Heard of the murder of mother and daughter (Gloria and Emily Coombs), in Cedar, by a man by the name of George Wood of that place. The former was lately married to a man by the name of Higbee, who tends the carding machine. Great excitement prevails.⁶³

Caroline Crosby did not describe the nature of the “excitement” in Beaver over the murder, nor did she offer any reflection on Olivia’s character.

Her diary nevertheless left compelling evidence of Olivia’s struggle with alcohol in San Bernardino, her unhappiness in her first marriage and disappointment in the second, her willingness and ability to escape one town for another, and, perhaps most important, her determination to retain custody of her daughters even when she recognized her own inability to care for them as she wished. Caroline’s patient and for the most part nonjudgmental record brings the criminal case against George Wood into conversation with the life story of one of his victims.

THE MURDER OF OLIVIA COOMBS AND THE MEMORY OF MOUNTAIN MEADOWS

In 1950, Juanita Brooks forged a connection between the massacre at Mountain Meadows and the murder of Olivia Coombs by adding to a footnote in her book a story shared with her by Olivia’s granddaughter Olive Branch Millburn. That connection persists today in family stories posted on the internet. Millburn told Brooks that her grandmother was

⁶³ CBC typescript, 974 (August 2, 1862).

murdered because when she came to Cedar City hoping to open a school she asked too many questions about the massacre. Yet her story as published also claims that the immediate impetus for the murder was a suggestion by one of George Wood's drunken friends that his son "was interested in" Olivia Coombs' daughter.⁶⁴

In retrospect, Millburn's story about in the massacre seems like an overlay on this perhaps less mentionable story. No one knows what happened in 1862 between sixteen-year-old Emily Coombs and seventeen-year-old Joseph Wood. Was it a teenage romance? A flirtation? A rape? An exchange of sexual favors for money or food? Or a scurrilous tale spread by the two women who told Wood they had witnessed the very act? Whatever happened precipitated a crime so barbaric and so blatant in its sexual marking of the victim's bodies that it is difficult to see how it could possibly have been provoked by anything Oliva could have said about the massacre, even if she had been repeating inflammatory threats gathered from the federal soldiers who passed through Beaver in 1859 or gossip gathered from fellow settlers in Santa Clara.⁶⁵

That doesn't mean Wood couldn't have had some leverage over George A. Smith or others who went out of their way to defend him or signed the petition for his reprieve. There is certainly room for more research on Wood and his associates and on the broader question of so-called "mountain common law" in early Utah. We also know far too little about the way

⁶⁴ Brooks, *Mountain Meadows Massacre*, 136 n4. See full text connected to note 3.

⁶⁵ On the presence of federal troops in Beaver and their interactions with Beaver residents, see CBC typescript, 820, 824, 830, 831 (April 19, 30, May 23, July 1, 12, 1859).

local authorities charges of sexual transgression or scandal-bearing by women.

In the end, however, Brooks' footnote may have less to tell us about Cedar City in 1862 than about the state of Utah history in 1950. Shortly after the publication of *The Mountain Meadow Massacre*, Millburn and her younger sister Irene Keller published family histories that, without ever mentioning the murder, described their grandmother as an industrious widow who supported her children by teaching. Keller added that before her conversion to Mormonism, Olivia attended New York University and "mastered several languages."⁶⁶ Such stories laid the foundation for Millburn's assertion about the massacre. Olivia aroused fears not only because she was curious, but because she was an educated woman capable of publishing what she found.

It doesn't take much effort to see that this profile, except perhaps the claim about languages, also described Juanita Brooks in 1950. It would have been impossible for Olivia Coombs to have attended an all-male New York University in the 1830s, in 1928 Juanita Pulsipher, a young widow who supported her son by teaching at Dixie State College, spent a year in New York City completing a graduate degree at Columbia University.⁶⁷ I am not arguing here for a self-conscious attempt to merge two narratives, simply pointing

⁶⁶ Keller, "The Coombs Family," 522. Lorin K. Hansen, "'Every Book . . . Has Been Read Through': The Brooklyn Saints and Harper's Library," *BYU Studies* 43, no. 4 (2004), 46 used Keller's claims to bolster his argument that passengers on the *Brooklyn* were well-educated.

⁶⁷ Peterson, *Juanita Brooks*, 31, 78-80, 83. Juanita married Brooks in 1933. Millburn was only three years older than he. If he attended any of the Branch family reunions organized in St. George.

to a perhaps unacknowledged affinity between the storyteller and her listener, a common recognition that a bright woman who showed too much interest in a taboo subject might raise suspicions in her community. Without question, it was Juanita's curiosity about the massacre that gave Millburn an opportunity to tell a story she had otherwise repressed.

Juanita Brooks did not date her interview with Millburn, nor did she explain how she came to know her. In the book, she identified her as "loyal member of the church, a guide on Temple Square." She was also a close relative of Will Brooks, Juanita's second husband. Millburn's genealogy of her father's family documents a connection that can be simply stated. Will Brooks' grandfather, William Henry Branch, was Olive Millburn's father.⁶⁸ Her mother was Elvira Coombs, the two-year-old child Caroline Crosby attempted to adopt in San Bernardino in 1857. When Elvira or "Ella" married Branch in the St. George Temple in 1877 she was 22 and he a widower aged 57. Most of his children by his first wife, including Will Brooks mother, were then fully grown. Branch died twelve years later leaving Ella a widow at the age of 34 with six children to raise. Olive, born in 1878, was her oldest daughter. Some of the stories she later told surely came from her mother, even those that did not totally add up as history.

Although Olive Millburn was only three years older than Will Brooks, they probably didn't know each other very well, since she grew up in Price, Utah in the eastern part of the state and he in St. George. But they without question met in St. George in September 1921 at a Branch family reunion

⁶⁸ Millburn, *The History, Diary, and Genealogy of William Henry Branch Sr.*, 71-72, 82-83, 39.

that included “a great fruit feast” held at the home of “Mr. and Mrs. William Brooks.? The “Mrs. Brooks “in that account would have been Will’s first wife Nellie Stevens. The distinguished photograph of William Branch that now a part of the Juanita Brooks photograph collection at the University of Utah is evidence of their common heritage.⁶⁹

In 1926, Millburn wrote a life sketch of her mother that while studiously avoided any mention of Olivia’s murder that offered a poignant account of Ella’s life. She said that after her mother’s death (which she dated to 1863), Cedar City officials bound Ella to an “old English schoolteacher” who “whipped her on every pretense, nearly starved her,” and often shut her “in a potato pit under the floor all night.” When the woman’s son reported his mother’s abuse, the town moved her into the home of Richard and Jane Birkbeck, a middle-aged couple English couple with no children of their own. When they officially adopted her, she changed her name to Ella Coombs Birkbeck (a surname Millburn was used for her mother years later in her own Social Security Application).⁷⁰ Ella claimed that her adoptive mother kept her out of school to work on their ten-acre farm and never allowed her to interact with other youth except to participate in choir or amateur theatricals.⁷¹

Did they also shield her from the details of her mother’s murder? If so, she somehow managed to acquire the basic story. In 1916, church historian Andrew Jensen typed up an account he had somehow acquired from “Mrs. William Branch”

⁶⁹ Millburn, *The History, Diary, and Genealogy of William Henry Branch Sr.* 93-94.

⁷⁰ Olive Branch Millburn, Social Security Application and Claims Index, 1936-2007, Ancestry.com

⁷¹ Millburn, *The History, Diary, and Genealogy of William Henry Branch Sr.*, 79-84.

of Price, Utah, perhaps on his visit to a stake conference in price that spring. According to Jensen's summary, Ella offered a dispassionate and succinct account of the crime, saying that in July 1862, "George Woods shot a woman (Mrs. Coombs) and beat her daughter at Cedar City. The mother died, while her daughter recovered. The mother's name was Olive Olivia Coombs. Mr. Wood beat the daughter over the head with the butt of his revolver until she was insensible from the effects of which she suffered from temporary insanity the rest of her life."⁷²

Ella's reference to Emily's injuries is notable. In their own much later family histories, Millburn and her sister described their aunt Emily as suffering brain fever from "a hurt" or "injury." In 1916 their mother not only willing to acknowledge Emily's hurt but reveal that it came from the butt of George Wood's revolver. Ella may or may not have shared what she knew about the murder with her daughters, but if she did, they chose to repress it. Nor is there any way of knowing whether at some point she discovered the charges made against her mother in the petition used to win Wood's pardon or whether she knew that one of the signers of that petition was Richard Birkbeck, the man who become her adoptive father.⁷³ The story Ella gave Andrew Jensen survives today as a typewritten entry in Jensen's patchwork manuscript history of pioneer Cedar City. Directly

⁷² Statement made by Mrs. Wm. Branch of Price, Carbon County, UT June 26, 1916, in LR 1514 Series 2 Cedar Ward, Parowan Stake, Manuscript and History compiled by Andrew Jensen. LDS Church History Library. Melanie Sturgeon kindly shared this reference with me.

⁷³ Since the petition was circulated in 1864 or 1865, Birkbeck may have signed it before Ella was moved from her first foster home.

below Ella's description of the murder, he pasted a clipping cut from an August 1862 copy of the *Deseret News*. It contained Henry Lunt's expansive description of the flourishing state of the town.⁷⁴

In a moving essay about a child returned to his relatives in Arkansas after the Mountain Meadow Massacre, Will Bagley observed, "Historians must handle memory—especially personal memories—as ruthlessly as detectives compare, interrogate, and match their sources against each other."⁷⁵ I would add that historians should interpret those memories not only in the context of the world storytellers purport to describe but in relation to their own later lives. Family stories, if carefully interpreted, stretch the boundaries of history, layering the hopes and aspirations of different generations, and revealing how human beings redeem their ancestors by constructing stories of resilience, self-reliance, and courage from grainy images of the past.

⁷⁴ Many thanks to Robin Jensen and Scott Marianno of the Church History Library for sharing their knowledge of Andrew Jensen's manuscript history with me.

⁷⁵ Will Bagley, "Touching History: A Grandson's Memories of Felix Marion Jones and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (Fall 2016), 295-311.

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