

A Foot in Both Camps

An Interview with Jan Tyler

by Linda Sillitoe

Jan L. Tyler, eldest of eight children, was born in Los Angeles and raised in Washington and Idaho. She received her B.A. in speech, drama, and music from Brigham Young University, and traveled to Salzburg, Austria with the first "Semester Abroad" program. She received her M.A. from Arizona State University, working out of the vice-president's office in student personnel. She is now completing her Ph.D. in educational administration at the University of Utah.

At Weber State University Jan was dean of women, associate dean of students, and assistant professor of student personnel. Then she went to BYU as director of the Family Consultation Center and associate professor of child development and family relations.

Active in Young Republicans, she has worked on political campaigns in Arizona, Washington, and Utah. Other responsibilities include membership on the advisory board of Odyssey House, a drug treatment center; work at the national level on child abuse problems; and service on the Utah board of the American Association of University Women.

Church activities include service as Relief Society president, on MIA and Sunday School stake boards, and as music director for several auxiliaries. She is presently a spiritual living teacher in her ward Relief Society.

"In the middle of it all was Jan L. Tyler, a 34-year-old former professor of child development at Brigham Young University, who, though an active member of the Mormon Church, is also an ardent supporter of the equal rights amendment, something to which her Church is officially opposed.

"As head of the Utah coordinating committee, Miss Tyler said she had been 'committed to do all I could to provide this kind of forum for Utah women,' and she had hoped that, with a foot in both camps, she would prove to be a bridge between them."

The New York Times
Monday, 25 July 1977

"On the IWY coordinating committee [Relief Society President Barbara Smith] commented: 'I personally don't think they could have been more fair in trying to present both points of view in an objective, good manner. I have nothing but commendation for that [Utah] IWY coordinating committee.'"

Interview of Barbara Smith
by Angelyn Nelson in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Sunday, 14 August 1977

The letters IWY hit Utah's newspaper headlines the last part of June 1977 and have appeared in news stories or on the editorial pages nearly every day since then. The state meeting held in Salt Lake City's Salt Palace involved nearly 14,000 women. Many thousands of those women came in response to an invitation from the LDS Relief Society. Approximately 6,000 women from Logan to Provo were "informed" at preconvention meetings, advertised in the *Utah Independent*, a right-wing newspaper, and addressed by various conservative speakers. A delegation of fourteen women and five alternates was elected by the convention; all but one were members of the Church; all appeared on one or more conservative "lists" distributed at the convention. Shortly before the national IWY convention in Houston, nine at-large delegates were appointed by the federal IWY committee. In the midst of all the controversy has been Jan Tyler, chairman of the IWY state meeting.

Jan Tyler has been involved in International Women's Year activities for several years. Her first involvement began early in 1972. Recalling this initial experience, Jan says, "I was invited to address an ad hoc committee in the State Department to give input for a proposal that was being prepared for the President, to include support from the United States in the celebrations of IWY-1975. I was impressed that I, relatively young in years, experience, and wisdom, should find myself addressing this distinguished, powerful, well-educated group of women several years my senior; that they should be interested in what I had gleaned from my educational experiences in Europe and as a Relief Society president; that they were so thoughtful, sensitive and tentative in their deliberations; that my response and encouragement of their plans seemed to matter.

"As I left the meeting, I recall praying, 'Dear Heavenly Father, please bless these good women with the courage needed to move forth with these important plans. Please withhold the divisive forces that will surely gather to thwart their execution. And if thou canst not attend to the latter, please bless the women of this world with a sensitivity to the lights within.'"

Later in 1973, Jan attended the State Department's Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations, which included a planning session on the United States involvement in IWY-1975.

A peak experience of the entire IWY adventure occurred at the beginning of the landmark year 1975 when Jan and Dr. Margaret Hoopes, a BYU colleague, attended a seminar in New York City jointly sponsored by the American Association of University Women and the United Nations. The seminar was designed to preview the international meeting Jan attended in Mexico later that year.

"I sat listening to the symphony of various languages and dialects, the gesturing, facial animation, the colorful



dress reflecting various lifestyles, customs, and religious practices," she remembers. "In many ways everything was foreign to me, and yet I felt very much at home. I thought I would burst with the tremendous feeling of sisterhood and wondered that I, who had been raised within a faith that so frequently uses the reference 'sister,' would discover its inclusive, not exclusive, meaning through the women's movement.

"As each woman stood to address the group, she would begin, 'Sisters,' with such sweetness, then pause as if to allow each of us the chance to cherish the deep meaning of that word. No exchange was shallow or frivolous. We took ourselves and each other seriously. We knew our time together was short and what we had to share with each other was important."

IWY-75 grew into the "Decade of Women" and it was decided that a national meeting would be held at the end of 1977, preceded by meetings in every state or area of the country. The National Commission on the Observance of IWY appointed Jan to chair the Utah state meeting. Task forces, selected to include women with several points of view, began preparing to present more than twenty issues concerning women. They worked for four intensive months to gather and present information to the women of Utah.

After receiving warnings from other states who had held their state meetings that extremist groups might try to interject themselves, Jan warned the group to be "completely above-board in all we did, because we would be responsible to answer for it."

Gauging the turnouts in other western states (the largest was California's 6,000) the committee prepared for 2-3,000 women. They expected that neither Mormon nor non-Mormon women would control an overwhelming majority because, although Mormon women are much more populous in Utah, they are also much less involved in the women's movement.

When the committee received word of the Relief Society letter which specified a quota of ten women from every ward in Utah, committee members opened the telephone directories available, counted the wards listed, multiplied by ten, and "nearly passed out." They divided that number by half and immediately expedited plans to accommodate a much larger group; but the estimate continued to climb and the final 14,000 came as a surprise.

Although the committee prepared physically for the influx of Mormon women, Jan reports that they were unprepared for the prevailing attitudes of the group. "It was shocking to me—the things those women said to me when they didn't know me or anything about me."

Before entering the hall to open the first plenary session Friday morning, Jan walked toward a registration table. A woman—apparently thinking that Jan was approaching a contribution box—jumped into her path and pulled her back from the table, screaming that she should not make a contribution. Shaken, Jan looked around; she saw women posted at other contribution boxes, and witnessed a similar scene in progress at another table. She returned to her office and wept briefly, pulled herself together, and opened the state meeting.

Later that day, Jan was informed that a woman with a baby had fallen in the restroom or adjoining hall, and there was doubt as to whether or not she or her baby had

been injured. First aid had been notified, but Jan was anxious to check on the situation herself.

As she left the exhibit hall, a woman grabbed her and hysterically related her distress that the "Lifestyles" workshop did not involve resolutions or voting. Preoccupied with this other situation, Jan tried to explain briefly that the workshop had been organized at the last minute to accommodate the numbers of women and that no resolutions were needed or intended from that workshop. "I just couldn't satisfy her," she recalls. "She kept pulling at me and shouting and finally burst into tears.

"I just looked at her, amazed at the contrast between her frenzy over what seemed to me a simple and trivial matter, and my sense of urgency over a genuine human concern." (As it turned out the woman and her baby were shaken, but not seriously hurt.)

Early Saturday morning the Friday evening plenary session was still in progress since a large body of women refused to leave, fearful that unwanted resolutions would be passed in their absence. After Barbara Smith suggested adjournment, the motion passed. "I was astonished when a group of women escorted Esther Landa (the parliamentarian) and me to our cars and remained in the parking lot until we drove off. They were afraid we would sneak back and pass things they didn't want passed.

"I feel that a combination of factors contributed to that state of mind. Primarily, Mormon women are generally uniformed about the women's movement because they don't see a need to be informed. People were able to play on their fears and feelings and we saw what comes of it. If people are uninformed, they are easily panicked."

Jan's role at the state meeting involved "being hit on all sides every second, and every time I turned around there was a microphone or television camera aimed at me." She listened to distressed committee and task force members whose investment of time and energy had been discarded by women unwilling to hear their presentations; she listened to angry, frustrated women who believed they were being manipulated by a national conspiracy; she tried to keep open channels of communication between and with all factions and with the press. She viewed her role as a peacemaker then and since the convention, trying to facilitate meeting the needs of the women involved.

"I wonder, if the negative expectations of those women had actually been realized at the convention, if the tumult would have died down sooner. Since nothing they expected to happen happened, maybe they are trying to redirect the angry energy they generated."

In November, Jan attended the national IWY convention in Houston as an invited guest (but paid her own way). Several members of her family accompanied her to reunite with other family members in Houston. She thought the convention was "terrific."

"The exhibit hall held hundreds of exhibits and all could make a statement. But it was like a well-blended stew. No one perspective dominated. There was a harmony about it. It was a fantastic opportunity for the exchange of information. It stimulated a number of areas of thought that hadn't occurred to me before as a part of the movement.

"The general atmosphere was one of friendliness, not hostility or suspicion. I felt I could walk up to anyone and

strike up a conversation, and did on a number of occasions."

How did Utah's representatives blend into that symphony of voices? "It seemed to me that the Utah elected delegation remained aloof, keeping pretty much to themselves. They didn't have the impact they could have had at the convention because they didn't have a sufficient grasp of parliamentary techniques to express themselves properly. Again and again they were ruled out of order because they held up the wrong cards. They preoccupied themselves, also, with procedural rather than substantive issues."

And the nine at-large delegates? "I was surprised that they were not far more active and vocal. They seemed to have no real organization. I thought it was an opportunity lost. But the thing I thought was beautiful about the delegation was they seemed to have a warm cohesiveness among themselves and with others. They felt a deep concern that they were not able to communicate and work with the elected delegation. One at-large delegate wept all the way home from Houston because of the feeling of rejection they received from the elected delegation."

Utah and the Mormon Church became subjects of national controversy when an official IWY statement linked the Church with radical groups—including the Ku Klux Klan and John Birch Society—as disrupters of IWY goals. Jan felt that it was "inappropriate for such a statement to have an official heading, but that is all I feel was inappropriate. The position of people in the Church on women's issues is the same as people in those organizations and we just can't deny that."

In conversations with several Klanners, Jan heard repeatedly, "Yes, the Mormons are a newfound ally." She adds, "It's the perception of many people, whether we like it or not, that we are an ally. The John Birch Society has known that for a long time. This is not new. For people to suddenly take offence is a little silly. Some vocal leaders on the state and local level have made so many accusations and done so much name calling. Now when the situation is reversed, they get up on their hind legs and demand an apology. That's the height of presumption."

Utah's delegation identified themselves as "pro-family." An enormous national pro-family rally was held in Houston during the IWY convention. Several hundred Utahns attended. Commenting on this, Jan recalls a talk by President Kimball at Brigham Young University in September of 1976, in which he stated that "no combination of forces that could gather together can destroy the family." Based upon her ten years of counseling, Jan agrees that nothing can destroy a family unless there is weakness within.

"Saying that ERA or anything else will destroy the family is nothing more than rhetoric. This idea is perpetuated by people who don't understand the dynamics of the marital relationship, and who are not willing to accept the responsibility within the context of that relationship. They are trying to discredit the other women in the movement, and the surest way is to suggest that they are anti-family." Recalling that the women's movement was initiated by family women, she emphasizes that "most issues in IWY can't be separated from family concerns, whether or not you agree with the stand."

When asked which part of the convention affected her most deeply, Jan described the opening of the convention when a torch representing one carried to Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 to the first women's rights congress was brought into the 1977 convention. "The past telescoped in and the link was made with the present. I felt a real closeness with our foremothers. It was thrilling! Then they brought in the torch and the crowd erupted—many of us spontaneously burst into tears."

One of the more controversial aspects of the national convention was the passage of a "sexual preference" resolution. Jan personally rejects homosexuality, in part because it is the "ultimate sexist statement," and was distressed by the resolution's passage.

"Far more insidious and damaging," Jan believes, "is living, as we do, in a homo-social society and being so accepting of it. Girls are given a male perspective in their education. I was robbed of my history until I began to study it myself in my twenties. Men and women can't relate to one another in a hetero-social way. And that is much worse."

Jan's position on abortion is consistent with the First Presidency's 1973 statement. She says, "I could never have an abortion. Within the context of my value system, I find it very difficult to accept. In cases of incest or rape, or when the mother's life is in danger, some exception might be made. I have counseled people in those situations and know how devastating it is. In those cases it might be allowed."

IWY has consumed much of Jan's time and energy, particularly during the last year. Was Houston a culmination, the end of an era in her life? "IWY is not the beginning or the end of anything. It is part of a process we have to go through until people are ready to focus on issues and solve problems. I've been eager to get the state and national meetings out of the way so we can move on to the next level.

"In Utah, extremists are going to continue to attack and assert that they have the answers. But despite all that noise, a lot of us will be pulling ourselves together. Groups will be emerging and will solve problems. We may not make the headlines, but that's all right." Jan does not care to play the leading role, but wants to continue working on women's issues.

What has the IWY experience done to or for Jan Tyler personally? "I've never had an experience where I felt so alone—completely alone. I learned that being alone is not a frightening thing."

"I appreciate the love and support I've had from my family through all of this, and I have found a lot of comfort in the relationship I have been building with our Heavenly Parents over the years.

"I've mellowed a lot. I found that I had been trusting some people I shouldn't have, and not trusting others I should have. I found out who my real friends are.

"I also found that I could not stand where most LDS women are standing; but I've known that about myself for a long time. I found also that I couldn't stand where most feminists stand. My place is somewhere between. And with all my study and experiences, I'm still not sure just where that place is. But I think that's exciting. It means I still have a lot of room to grow."