

## BOOK NOTES

## INTIMATE JOURNEYS

## THE SUM OF OUR PAST: REVISITING MORMON WOMEN

by Judy Busk

Signature Books, 2004

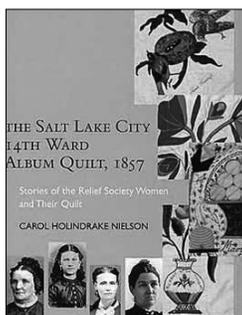
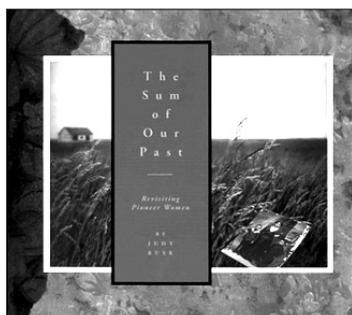
248 pages, illustrations, index, \$32.95

THE SALT LAKE CITY 14TH WARD ALBUM QUILT, 1857:  
STORIES OF THE RELIEF SOCIETY WOMEN  
AND THEIR QUILT

by Carol Holindrake Nielson

University of Utah Press, 2004

176 pages, illustrations, index, \$24.95

*Reviewed by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich*

*In these attractively illustrated books, two Utah women explore connections to their own religious and family heritage.*

*Each book takes the reader on a journey—in Busk's case, a literal and metaphorical journey along the pioneer trail; in Nielson's, a journey of discovery as she traces the provenance and meaning of a family relic.*

JUDY BUSK, AN English and journalism teacher in Richfield, Utah, and a columnist for the southern Utah *Daily Spectrum*, set out in September 1993 with her husband, Neal, to explore sites along the Mormon trail. She filled their modern “covered wagon”—a Ford van—with books, articles, and dissertations describing the lives of pioneer women. The book is not a guide to the pioneer trail; it is a series of personal es-

says framed by descriptions of sites visited on that 1993 trip. Visiting the pristine houses in restored Nauvoo led to meditations on housekeeping. Busk explores the ironies of a “bakery never flour-dusted or ash-dirtied because nothing is ever baked there” or in “a bedroom whose four-poster bed is neatly covered by a finely stitched patchwork quilt,” undisturbed because no one slept there (29). For her, this picture-pretty past did little but

create guilt about her own homemaking failures. Thus, she was delighted to find a dozent who admitted that the cookies handed out to visitors had actually been made elsewhere. Seeing an actual kitchen in all its stickiness, “will cure any illusion you might have about the good old pioneer days” (32).

Busk's touch is light. She obviously isn't interested in delving into the theological stickiness in Nauvoo or elsewhere on the pioneer trail. For her, the past is the past, and she is happy to live in the present. In the chapter on polygamy, for example, she writes, “I am personally grateful for Wilford Woodruff's Manifesto. . . . I like having sisters in the gospel, but not sister wives. I'm glad I live in the present of mainstream Mormonism and not in its past” (179). In a book laced with personal memories, she offers a sampling of current scholarship on Mormon pioneer women and evocative descriptions of the pioneer trail.

I N contrast to the loose lyricism of Busk's meditations, Carol Nielson's book offers focused and meticulously researched information on a single object, a massive quilt made in 1856 by members of Salt Lake City's Fourteenth Ward Relief Society as a fundraiser. Nielson explains that Richard Horne, the twelve-year-old son of ward Relief Society counselor Mary Isabella Horne, won the quilt in a raffle, kept it for forty years, then cut it right down the middle, giving one half to his daughter Belle and the other to his daughter Lizzie. The two halves remained apart for nearly a century. When Nielson's husband inherited one half, Nielson was determined to find the other. Through careful research, she eventually found the remote cousin who had it. Then she got busy researching the lives of the women who made it.

*The Salt Lake City 14th Ward Album Quilt* contains colored photographs of the quilt, a sketch of the history of the 14th Ward Relief Society, and biographical sketches of sixty-four of the women who made it. They include the polygamous wives of well-known Church leaders such as Parley Pratt and Wilford Woodruff. Woodruff's wife Phebe was president of the Relief Society. But there are also fascinating sketches of little-known women such as Ester Ann Luce and her sister Caroline, who were among those converted in the Fox Islands of Maine, and Sarah Rose, whose silk sampler is now at the Pioneer Memorial Museum. Thanks to Nielson's research, we know that the quiltmakers came from fifteen states and five foreign countries. Some lived together in the same households as polygamous wives.



LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH is the James Duncan Phillips Professor of History at Harvard College. She is a specialist in American social history, women's history, and material culture. Her most recent book is *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Making of an American Myth*. She won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for history for her book, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812*.

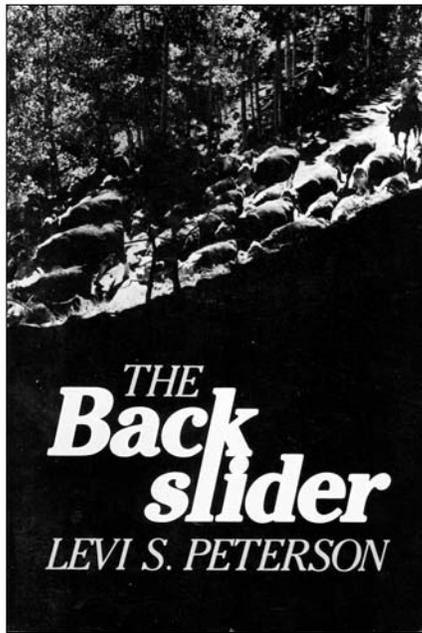
Nielson has done a remarkable job of culling information from a wide variety of sources. The book includes footnotes and a full bibliography. Although she doesn't say much about the needlework itself, she links each biography to a colored photo of its maker's square. As a consequence, the book is both an engaging work in its own right and an invitation to further research in the decorative arts. The quilt not only documents the skills of pioneer women, it is also an encyclopedia of fabrics available in Utah a decade before the coming of the railroad.

Fancy embroidery and appliqué are not the first things you think of when you read documentary accounts of this period. Relief Societies were primarily engaged in charitable works, providing clothing for local Indians and raising money to assist immigration. In June 1857, Wilford Woodruff attended a meeting of the Relief Society held at his house, where he saw fifty women "sewing, knitting, sewing carpet rags, making quilts, &c. It is a laudable undertaking," he wrote. "They clothe all the poor in the ward and during the last quarter they made a donation to the Perpetual Emigrating Fund of \$126. I wish all go and do like wise" (26). But quilts don't have to be fancy to keep people warm. Although the sisters of the Fourteenth Ward Relief Society no doubt relieved the poor, they also relieved themselves of the drudgery of house-keeping, the burdens of self-sufficiency, the anxieties of polygamy, and the dangers of idleness.

**T**OGETHER Busk's and Nielson's books illustrate the paradoxical relationship many contemporary LDS women have with our iconic pioneer past. Pioneer women are the paragons of piety, domesticity, and frontier courage against which we measure ourselves. But they are also the reminders of a social system we would sooner forget. Unlike Church-sponsored histories, both books acknowledge the existence of plural marriage, yet neither is comfortable probing its implications. Busk is happy that the Church abandoned its practice—but doesn't ask what its residue may imply for women today. Nielson simply notes that many squares in the 14th ward quilt—including those in Wilford Woodruff's own household—were made by "sister wives." For both authors, exploring the complexities of plural marriage would get in the way of their larger objective—to give nineteenth-century women a place in history, neither as heroines nor as victims, but as individuals. They have taken us part of the way. ☺



## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS



IN 1986, SIGNATURE BOOKS PUBLISHED *THE BACKSLIDER*, BY LEVI S. PETERSON.

A comic novel with the depths of tragedy, a cowboy novel with profound theological resonance, a coming-of-age novel which gets better read in middle age, a "Mormon" novel and an un-Mormon novel, a novel of natural carnality whose consummation is a moving affirmation of monogamous love—*The Backslider* is a book with many readings and many meanings.

**J**OIN US IN CELEBRATING TWENTY YEARS OF *THE BACKSLIDER* for a Festschrift collection of essays. We are seeking reader responses, ruminations, and personal essays about *The Backslider*. Selected essays will be published in SUNSTONE magazine, on the Sunstone website, and possibly in a book. First contributions to this celebratory conversation on the novel—from Eric Samuelsen, Gae Lyn Henderson, Morgan Adair, Bruce Jorgensen, Marylee Mitcham, and Cherie Woodworth—were presented at the 2005 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (Tape SL05-236).

If you have ideas, suggestions, submissions, or questions, please send them to Cherie Woodworth, executive editor of the Festschrift project, at [cherie.woodworth@aya.yale.edu](mailto:cherie.woodworth@aya.yale.edu).



**P**reliminary deadline for submissions, for priority consideration, is May 1, 2006. Final deadline for all submissions is JULY 1, 2006.