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The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young

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The Untold Story of The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young: Ann Eliza Young and Her Fight Against Polygamy

The history of the American West is filled with tales of pioneers, exploration, and complex social structures. Few figures loom as large in this narrative as Brigham Young, the second president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) and the founder of Salt Lake City. While much is written about his leadership in settling Utah, a compelling and often controversial chapter involves his multiple marriages. Among the many women who entered into plural marriage with him, one stands out not for her quiet devotion, but for her very public rebellion: Ann Eliza Young, famously known as **The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young**. Her story is not merely a footnote in Mormon history; it is a powerful narrative of disillusionment, courage, and the fight for women's rights in the 19th century.

This article delves deep into the life of Ann Eliza Young, exploring who she was, the circumstances that led to her marriage, her bitter divorce, and her subsequent career as a lecturer and author who helped shape national policy against polygamy. We will navigate the historical context of plural marriage, examine the controversies surrounding Brigham Young's domestic life, and understand why the story of the 19th wife remains relevant today.

Understanding the Context: Plural Marriage in Early Mormonism

To understand Ann Eliza Young, one must first understand the religious framework of her time. The practice of plural marriage, or polygamy, was introduced by Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, in the 1830s and 1840s. It was codified as a religious doctrine in 1852, years after the Mormons had settled in the Utah Territory under Brigham Young's leadership. Followers believed that plural marriage was a divine commandment, a test of faith, and a way to build a righteous society.

The Scale of Brigham Young's Household

Brigham Young is historically recorded as having married 55 women during his lifetime, though not all were cohabiting wives. Some were "sealings" for eternity without a temporal marital relationship. However, the term **The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young** specifically refers to Ann Eliza Webb Dee Young, who was his 19th legal or "time" wife. She entered his household in 1868, a time when the practice of polygamy was facing increasing scrutiny from the United States federal government. The household was a complex social ecosystem run with strict efficiency. Wives lived in separate homes or apartments, and Brigham Young would rotate his time among them. The logistics were managed by a central office, and the family network included dozens of children.

Who Was Ann Eliza Young?

Ann Eliza Webb was born in 1844 in Nauvoo, Illinois, at a time of great turmoil for the Latter-day Saints. Her father, Chauncey Webb, was a Mormon convert, and her mother, Eliza Churchill, was a strong-willed woman.

As a young girl, Ann Eliza made the trek to Utah with her family. She grew up in a society where polygamy was becoming normalized, but she harbored personal doubts about the practice.

Early Marriage and Widowhood

Before she became known as **The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young**, Ann Eliza had already been married. At the age of 19, she married a man named James Dee. The marriage was reportedly unhappy, and James Dee was not a faithful husband. He passed away in 1862, leaving Ann Eliza a widow with two young sons. She struggled financially and socially as a single mother in Salt Lake City. Her mother, Eliza, was a confidante of Brigham Young, and she advocated for Ann Eliza to find security through marriage.

It is within this context of vulnerability that the offer of marriage from Brigham Young arose. He was 67 years old; she was 24. The power dynamic was profoundly unequal. Ann Eliza later claimed she was pressured into the marriage by family members and church leaders who praised the spiritual blessings of being sealed to the Prophet. She married Brigham Young in 1868, becoming **The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young** in the public record.

Life as the 19th Wife: A House of Detention

Ann Eliza Young's experience in the Young household was starkly different from the idyllic picture painted by church leaders. She moved into the "Beehive House," one of Brigham Young's primary residences, but she quickly found her new life to be one of isolation and strict control.

Strict Rules and Limited Freedom

Brigham Young ran his household with military precision. Wives were expected to adhere to schedules, maintain silence about their grievances, and show absolute obedience. Ann Eliza was not given the financial independence she had hoped for. She was allocated a modest allowance and was expected to ask permission for minor expenditures. She reported that she felt less like a wife and more like a possession on display.

She was also expected to care for other wives' children and perform domestic chores. The reality of being **The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young** meant living in a crowded hierarchical structure where she was low in seniority. The emotional neglect and lack of genuine companionship took a heavy toll on her mental health.

The Turning Point

The breaking point came when Ann Eliza claimed that Brigham Young physically abused her. She also alleged that he was unjustly harsh with her sons. After enduring the arrangement for several years, she made a radical decision. In 1873, she approached Brigham Young and asked for a divorce. He refused, citing church doctrine that a sealing was eternal. Undeterred, Ann Eliza made the daring choice to leave the household without his permission. She packed her belongings and fled to a hotel in Salt Lake City, effectively declaring war on the most powerful man in the territory.

The Divorce Trial That Shocked a Nation

The divorce case of Ann Eliza Young versus Brigham Young became a national sensation. It was not merely a domestic dispute; it was a high-profile legal and political battle that exposed the inner workings of the Mormon hierarchy to the American public.

Legal Grounds and Publicity

Ann Eliza sued for divorce on the grounds of cruelty, neglect, and desertion. She did not seek alimony for herself but demanded a property settlement. The case, *Young v. Young*, was heard in the Third District Court of Utah. Brigham Young fought the case vigorously, not only to protect his reputation but also to prevent a legal precedent that could dismantle the structure of polygamous families.

The trial was a media circus. Reporters from across the country flocked to Salt Lake City to hear Ann Eliza Young describe her travels as the nineteenth wife of Brigham Young. She portrayed Brigham Young as a tyrant who used religion to control women. Her testimony was published in newspapers from New York to San Francisco, fueling the growing anti-polygamy sentiment in the nation.

The Outcome

After a lengthy legal battle, the court eventually granted Ann Eliza a divorce in 1875. However, she was awarded only a modest settlement of $3,000 per year for alimony. Brigham Young appealed, and the United States Supreme Court eventually ruled on the matter, though the alimony was later reduced. For Ann Eliza, the legal victory was secondary to the moral victory. She had successfully stood up to the leader of the LDS Church and exposed the reality of polygamy to the world.

From Wife to Activist: Ann Eliza's National Crusade

After her divorce, Ann Eliza Young did not fade into obscurity. She reinvented herself as a national lecturer and author. She adopted the stage name "The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young" and used her platform to advocate for the abolition of polygamy.

"Wife No. 19" – A Bestselling Memoir

In 1876, she published her memoir, *Wife No. 19, or the Story of a Life in Bondage*. The book was a runaway bestseller. In it, she detailed her life from childhood through her marriage to Brigham Young. She argued that polygamy was a system of "legalized prostitution" that degraded women and destroyed families. The book provided the general American public with an insider's perspective on a practice they found abhorrent.

Her writing style was direct, emotional, and persuasive. She appealed to the Victorian sensibilities of her readers by highlighting the suffering of women and children. By framing herself as **The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young**, she leveraged her personal credibility to make her political arguments more powerful.

The Lecture Circuit

Ann Eliza Young became a star on the national lecture circuit. She traveled across the eastern and midwestern United States, speaking in churches, town halls, and theaters. She shared the stage with prominent suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. While the suffrage movement primarily focused on voting rights, Ann Eliza connected the oppression of women in polygamy to the broader struggle for women's legal emancipation.

Impact on Federal Legislation

Ann Eliza's activism had a tangible impact on federal policy. She testified before Congress, providing firsthand accounts that helped shape public opinion. Her work contributed to the passage of the Edmunds Act of 1882 and the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887, which criminalized polygamy and disincorporated the LDS Church. These laws ultimately forced the church to officially abandon the practice of plural marriage in 1890. While many factors led to this change, the voice of **The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young** was a crucial catalyst.

Criticism and Counter-Narratives

Naturally, Ann Eliza Young's story is not without controversy. The LDS Church and defenders of Brigham Young have pushed back against her claims, painting her as a disgruntled woman motivated by greed and fame rather than principle.

Challenges to Her Credibility

Critics argue that Ann Eliza sensationalized her story. They point out that she later struggled with financial stability and made some questionable personal decisions. Some historians suggest that she may have overstated the extent of the abuse she suffered. Furthermore, her second marriage after the divorce, to a non-

Mormon man, also ended in divorce, leading some to question her narrative of victimhood.

However, even detractors acknowledge that her core critiques of the polygamous system—its inequality, its lack of consent for women, and its potential for abuse—were valid. While the details of her personal life may be debated, the structural issues she highlighted are well-documented by other sources.

Balancing the Historical Record

It is important to place Ann Eliza's story alongside those of other wives who defended polygamy. Many of Brigham Young's other wives, such as Zina D.H. Young and Eliza R. Snow, were highly respected, educated women who publicly supported plural marriage. They saw it as a spiritual duty and a source of community. Ann Eliza's experience was not universal, but it was real for many women. The story of **The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young**thus represents one of the many diverse experiences within the complex institution of 19th-century Mormon polygamy.

The Legacy of The 19th Wife Of Brigham Young

Ann Eliza Young's legacy is multifaceted. She is remembered as a feminist pioneer, a whistleblower, and a complex historical figure who navigated a difficult path between religious duty and personal freedom.

In Popular Culture

Her life has inspired novels, documentaries, and historical studies. The most famous fictional treatment is David Ebershoff's 2008 novel *The 19th Wife*, which weaves together Ann Eliza's historical story with a modern-day murder mystery involving a polygamous sect. This book brought her story to a new generation of readers.

A Symbol of Resistance

For modern critics of fundamentalist polygamy, Ann Eliza Young

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