

The Salt Lake Tribune

Shocking historical finding: Mormon icon Eliza R. Snow was gang-raped by Missouri ruffians

History • BYU-Idaho scholar discusses her research during academic forum.



By Peggy Fletcher Stack The Salt Lake Tribune

• March 17, 2016 12:42 pm

This is an archived article that was published on sltrib.com in 2016, and information in the article may be outdated. It is provided only for personal research purposes and may not be reprinted.

In the sedate setting of an academic symposium in Provo, a respected LDS scholar delivered this historical bombshell:

Eliza R. Snow, one of Mormonism's "founding mothers," was gang-raped by eight Missourians during 19th-century tensions between LDS settlers and their Midwestern enemies.

"The rape was brutal, and so it made Eliza unable to have children," Brigham Young University-Idaho professor Andrea Radke-Moss said in an interview. Mormon founder Joseph Smith "offered her marriage as a way of promising her that she would still have eternal offspring and that she would be a mother in Zion."

Snow was one of the faith's longest-serving presidents of the female Relief Society, a strong advocate for women's suffrage and a well-known poet who penned the famous lyrics to the beloved Mormon hymn "O My Father," which refers to the LDS belief of a Heavenly Mother.

News about the rape — discussed Thursday by Radke-Moss for the first time in an academic forum — comes from the autobiography of Alice Merrill Horne, the granddaughter of Bathsheba W. Smith, one of Snow's closest friends.

As a child, Horne would spend time at her grandmother's home, listening to the elderly women of Mormondom reminisce about the early days of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Radke-Moss said. "She then wrote about those visits 50 years later in the 1930s, where she recalled hearing those women discuss the rape of Eliza."

Those recollections seem to confirm the speculation of Snow's biographer, historian Jill Mulvey Derr, who has argued that the iconic writer's wording about Missouri "exposes particular rage that is not seen in most of her other poetry."

Understanding Snow's horrific experience could help Mormon women today, "some of whom live in war-torn areas where they themselves have been the victims of rapes," Radke-Moss suggested. "How much better can we nurture and mourn with these women

than to provide them with an empathetic model of the survivor of a gang rape in war? And not just any Mormon woman, but the Mormon woman."

It might also help modern Latter-day Saints "rethink, or at least complicate, the origins of plural marriage," Radke-Moss said. For Snow, polygamy was about "spiritual comfort following a savage crime that made her infertile, and a protective measure in the context of trauma and sexual violence that Mormon women experienced."

Radke-Moss' BYU presentation — "Beyond Petticoats and Poultices: Finding a Women's History of the Mormon-Missouri War of 1838" — left many women with "tears in their eyes and faces of disbelief," said Mormon blogger and writer Emily W. Jensen, who was in the audience. "As Radke-Moss described how understanding this part of Eliza Snow's history can help women today process their own histories of sexual abuse and violence, I saw nodding heads."

It left Jensen, one of the editors of the new volume "A Book of Mormons: Latter-day Saints on a Modern-Day Zion," wondering: Did Snow's experience prompt her "to seek her Mother in Heaven?"

pstack@sltrib.com

Twitter: @religiongal —

One of Eliza Snow's Missouri poems

'Twas Autumn: Summer's melting breath was gone,

And winter's gelid blast was stealing on.

To meet its dread approach, with anxious care

The houseless Saints were struggling to prepare.

When round about a desp'rate mob arose,

Like tigers waking from a night's repose —

They come like hordes from nether shades let loose —

Men without hearts — just made for Satan's use!

With wild demoniac rage they sally forth,

Resolv'd to drive the Saints of God from Earth."



