

## **Martha Hughes Cannon: An Example of a New Womanhood in Utah**

Martha Hughes Cannon, a nineteenth-century intellectual and activist, was described by a Chicago newspaper as "the brightest exponent of the women's cause in the United States."<sup>1</sup> Cannon is most well known for being the first female state senator in the US. She ran as a Democrat and was elected on November 3, 1896. Cannon's additional claim to fame is that she defeated her husband, who ran as a Republican, by nearly 3,000 votes. A local paper commented on the husband's loss by saying, "Mrs. Mattie Hughes Cannon, his wife, is the better man of the two. Send Mrs. Cannon to the State Senate and let Mr. Cannon, as a Republican, remain at home to manage home industry."<sup>2</sup> Martha didn't intend for her victory to overshadow her husband--she was simply trying to gain the power to enact the health reform legislation that she saw as necessary for the health of under-represented Utahns, such as women, children and the disabled.

Despite Cannon's fame as a Utah Senator, she had many achievements under her belt before she ran for public office. At age nineteen she decided she wanted to be a doctor, and soon graduated from the University of Deseret with a degree in chemistry. Within five more years she completed her medical degree at the University of Michigan, went on to earn a B.S. from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Pharmacy and a bachelors of oratory degree from the National School of Elocution and Oratory. She soon returned to Utah, started a nursing school and became the second female physician at the Deseret Hospital. Cannon met her husband at the hospital--he was the director--and soon became his fourth wife through a polygamous marriage.

In my research I will examine Cannon's life as an example of the 'New Woman' that emerged in the latter half of the 19th century. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg defines New Women as those who "rejecting conventional female roles and asserting their right to a career, to a public voice, to visible power, laid claim to the rights and privileges customarily accorded bourgeois men"<sup>3</sup>. Certainly Cannon rejected conventional female roles through her political and professional life, but also in her mode of marriage. The contradiction between her choices in the public and private sphere is an interesting one, which I believe deserves closer analysis. In looking at Cannon's history I will broaden the examination of her experiences to the lives of other Mormon women who were living exemplary, public lives and compare them to their counterpart New Women of the East.

My project will also use the story of Martha Cannon as a frame for the larger issues of suffrage, politics and polygamy and how they affected the lives of Utah women as a whole. For example, while Utah was the second state to gain female suffrage, this was granted in the hopes of eradicating polygamy, for it was thought that polygamy was an oppression that women would vote against when given the chance. However, the opposite occurred when Utah female voters supported legislation to protect polygamous marriage.

My study will address a number of questions about Utah New Women, such as: (1) Why were they so active in suffrage and reform movements?; (2) How did their political activities relate to their family obligations?; (3) What type of barriers did they face in their political

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<sup>1</sup> From <http://www.health.utah.gov/martha.html>

<sup>2</sup> From [http://www.polygamyinfo.com/past\\_media%20plyg%2053%20trib.htm](http://www.polygamyinfo.com/past_media%20plyg%2053%20trib.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. *Disoderly Conduct*, p. 176

activity?; (4) How were their gender roles unique and how were they similar to women across the US?

I began my research this Fall as part of my requirements for the History course, 'US in the 1890s', that I am taking with Alice Fahs. This is the first of a two-quarter series that I will complete next Spring. I am also taking a class in 19th century gender issues with Dr, Fahs which will give me information for my research. In addition, I met with Joan Ariel, the History librarian, who gave me advice on this project. I will use the ILL system to obtain some of the necessary materials that are unavailable at UCI. Because there are many items about Martha Cannon in Special Collections at the University of Utah and at the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers Museum in Salt Lake City, I intend to travel to Utah in January to conduct research in these venues. During Winter Quarter I will complete my paper, and plan to give an oral presentation of my findings at the 2004 UROP Symposium next May.

## **Selected Bibliography**

### *Primary Sources*

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### *Secondary Sources*

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Noall, Claire. *Guardians of the hearth; Utah's pioneer midwives and women doctors*. Bountiful, Utah, Horizon Publishers, 1974.

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## **Research Timeline**

Fall Quarter:

History 190 Course with faculty mentor to develop and research my topic  
Meeting with Joan Ariel, the History librarian

Winter Quarter:

History 192 class with faculty mentor to focus on writing my research paper  
Travel to Salt Lake City:  
    Daughters of the Utah Pioneers archives  
    University of Utah Special Collections  
Finish writing the 20-30 page paper

Spring Quarter

Prepare for Presentation at the UROP Symposium

**Research Budget**

Xerox Copies: \$120

Printer Cartridge: \$10

Blank CDs for Microfilm Copying: \$5

Pens and Paper: \$8

Research Software, *Endnotes*: \$110

Travel:

    Airfare to Salt Lake City: \$325

    Car rental, 4 days: \$125

Total Cost: \$703