

History of the Ephraim Relief Society Granary

By Rhonda Lauritzen

Overview:

The Ephraim Relief Society Granary was built in the early 1870s of the same beautiful Sanpete oolitic limestone used for many historic Sanpete structures. The Granary was autonomously owned by women, holding their wheat inventories collected as part of the historic grain saving program started in 1876. This program was run by the women's organization of the [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#)¹, called the [Relief Society](#). In Ephraim, this effort was a testament to how much these early women accomplished when they and their families had so little.

Today this lovely vernacular building is the most impressive Relief Society Granary of the nine remaining in Utah, even though granaries once existed in nearly every Utah town. The Ephraim Granary may have been the finest of any built, given that the Sanpete Valley was considered the “granary of Utah.” It stands today as a cherished monument from this early period and is a reminder of the successful wheat storage program, which is still a source of pride among Utah women. Wheat is depicted on the Relief Society emblem and in bronze on the façade of the Relief Society headquarters in Salt Lake City.

The Ephraim Granary and the Relief Society Hall in the Co-op next door gave women a public presence on Main Street. This building is a proud symbol of early female autonomy, economic success, and charitable endeavors.

About the Ephraim Relief Society:

The Female Relief Society was originally formed in Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1842 (the word “female” was later dropped from the name). It was a Mormon women's organization similar to other women's clubs of the nineteenth century. The Relief Society's focus was on charitable activities and the betterment of women. There was a hiatus after 1845 when the new Church President, [Brigham Young](#), disbanded it.²

The Ephraim Relief Society was organized on December 7, 1856, a little more than two years after the [first Mormon settlers](#) came to Ephraim. Ephraim was one of the first communities to re-establish a Relief Society in the Utah Territory. Women first held meetings in a “small hall inside the fort in an outdoor bowery.” In 1860 when local members of the Church built their first chapel in

¹ This is the formal name, which will hereafter be abbreviated as the Church. Although the Church's style requests discontinuation of the name Mormon or LDS, we are choosing to include the term Mormon for historic context because of the widespread traditional use of that name during the time period.

² Derr, Jill Mulvay., Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow. *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-Day Saint Women's History*. Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historians Press, 2016

Ephraim, the Relief Society began meeting there. This arrangement continued until the women had their own hall on the second floor of the Co-op, beginning in 1872.³

A space for women and a record of their voices:

The Ephraim Relief Society Granary and the Hall next door gave women a formal place in public affairs, perhaps the *only* dedicated public spaces for women. [Dr. Thomas Carter's](#) book, [*Building Zion, the Material World of Mormon Settlement*](#), notes that:

"Zion was a man's world. In reading over 50 years of ward minutes for each town in the valley, I encountered no female voice. They were there, but in public at least, perfectly silent. We can hear their voices in journals and diaries but mostly they speak of their daily routines."⁴

When the Ephraim Relief Society purchased⁵ the Hall and Granary, these women had a place of their own.⁶

It is also important to note that the Ephraim Relief Society kept minutes of their meetings. Their voices are written down in those proceedings when there is very little recorded elsewhere. Hence, the Ephraim Relief Society minutes, Hall, and Granary leave a tangible record that these women lived and that they mattered.

[Read related article: Finding forgotten voices in the Church History archives](#)

About the Relief Society grain storage program:

Shortly after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young asked congregations to store up grain, partly in response to years where "Mormon Crickets" and grasshoppers had nearly decimated the harvest. A strategy of self-reliance was core to Mormon philosophy and the grain storage program

³ Armstrong, Agnes S., and Helen E. Young. *History of the Ephraim Relief Society for the Years Ending 1876-7*. Note: This is a typed manuscript labeled as having been created from original materials on file at Snow College. This copy was found on file in the LDS Church Archives.

⁴ Carter, Thomas. *Building Zion: The Material World of Mormon Settlement*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

⁵ The Ephraim Relief Society Granary was originally built by the local ward of the Church, and an official deed transferred ownership in 1896, but it is likely that the Relief Society took over its operations earlier and may have even purchased the building earlier.

⁶ Deeds:

1. January 17, 1872: Deed from Ephraim City to Canute Peterson, Trustee in trust of Ephraim Branch of the Church of Jesus's Christ of Latter-day Saints purchasing all of lot 5, the block that would later contain the Granary and Co-op.
2. Deed, signed February 13, 1885, filed February 26, 1885: Ephraim Mercantile Co-op Institution bought from Trustee of Ephraim Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day saints all of lot 5 for \$5.00.
3. Deed 24 March 1896, from Ephraim Co-op to Ephraim North Ward Relief Society, transferring title to both the Granary and the second floor of the Co-op.
4. Deed, 30 Dec. 1899, for property of Relief Society Granary, as joint tenants, etc. from Ephraim North Ward Relief Society, to Ephraim South Ward Relief Society. This transaction split assets following the split of the Ephraim LDS Ward and Relief Society, due to population growth.
5. Deed 29 May 1914, from Ephraim North Ward to Ephraim Milling and Elevator Company.
6. Note that the Ephraim Relief Society owned a silkworm farm before the turn of the century, but the climate was reportedly too cold, and the enterprise failed. "When the early silk industry proved unsuccessful, the Silk Farm owned by the Relief Society was traded for a rock building just north of the Tithing Office (Andy Thompson home) which became known as the Society Granary. Earlier the Society had purchased the upper floor of the Co-op Store."

was in keeping with a belief among Church members that they must prepare for the second coming of Jesus Christ.

In addition to the idea of grain as a safety net, wheat was a resource used to feed the poor, including waves of new [pioneer immigrants](#) who entered the Salt Lake Valley each year, exhausted and bereft.

In 1876-1877, Brigham Young became frustrated by feeble efforts to store grain and he asked Relief Society General Secretary Emmeline B. Wells to head up the program. It is an important highlight that women were placed in charge of this because public leadership by women in the Church was rare in those days. Church Apostle Franklin D. Richards publicly commented on this by saying,

“A little over three months ago, President Young stood where I now stand. You remember how respectfully he asked, ‘Will you do these things, sisters?’...The President talked wheat for twenty years. Now the sisters have taken it in hand and are doing something.”⁷

The First Presidency of the Mormon Church supported Relief Society autonomy on this matter, repeatedly reminding male leaders of the Church throughout the Utah Territory that they had no claim to Relief Society grain or authority over the program. If the men needed grain, they must ask the women. For example, Church President Wilford Woodruff said:

“There has been a feeling by the bishops in some places that they have a right to go and take that wheat without giving any receipts for it and that it was not necessary for these societies to lay up wheat. But it is necessary and we should sustain them in it. And while the sisters are helping us to build our temples and tithing offices, we should assist them. The sisters ought to have the right to lay up something for themselves, to build granaries and have this wheat. As President of the Church, I have no right to go and take the wheat from them...”⁸

The Sanpete County Relief Societies reported great success with the grain storage program, as noted in the book *Charities and Philanthropies: Woman’s Work in Utah*, and edited by Emmeline B. Wells:

“The county has been very energetic in storing up wheat, and much of it has been gleaned by the women and children. There is in the granaries now on hand 8,536 bushels, which is kept as a standing fund and not included in receipts or disbursements, but is considered separate and apart. Real estate, such as land, granaries, halls for meetings, etc., owned by the society, separate from the regular amounts reported. There are quite a number of buildings owned by women in the county, one or two of them quite large and commodious, and in some places, there are stores and millinery establishments managed entirely by the Relief Society...”⁹

Relief Society grain was donated for many charitable causes, including to San Francisco after the earthquake of 1906, and during World War I. The Relief Society grain program continued for

⁷ Derr, Jill Mulvay., Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow. *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-Day Saint Women’s History*. Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historians Press, 2016

⁸ Woodruff, Wilford. "Talks to the Sisters." *Deseret Weekly* (Salt Lake City, Utah), February 24, 1894. p. 287.

⁹ Wells, Emmeline B., ed. *Charities and Philanthropies: Woman's Work in Utah*. Salt Lake City, UT: George Q. Cannon & Sons, Printers, 1893.

roughly a hundred years. It was the longest running and most successful program in the history of the Relief Society.

Salvation Wheat

The following oral history of Florence Peterson Faux illustrates what wheat meant to early Ephraim settlers. The subject is Mrs. Sarah Peterson, who was the Ephraim Relief Society President, and her name appears on the deeds for the Granary.

“It was in the spring of 1856 – three years since her husband, Canute Peterson, had left for his mission to Norway. Back in Lehi (a settlement between Salt Lake City and Manti), Sarah Ann was having her problems.

All of her neighbors were busy planting their crops, but she knew that if her own fields were to be planted with wheat, she would have to do it herself, as all the men were too busy with their own plots to help her. Taking her hoe and the precious bucket of wheat seed, Sarah began planting the grain. By making the pharaohs with a hoe, it was planted real deep.

The grain in all the other fields, being planted earlier and not so deep, came up fresh and green and was a beautiful sight to see, but calamity struck the little community. Grasshoppers in countless millions were upon them (the fields), and were on the fields before they were aware of them, and they devoured every green spear in sight and passed on to other communities.

A week passed by and the late-planted wheat in Sarah's field began growing. Here was one little crop that had been spared by the hand of Providence. It was tended with loving care by Sarah all that summer, and when harvest time came, all the men helped Sarah harvest her wheat, as it was the only cleat to be harvested in Lehi that year.

When it was finally thrashed, Sarah had raised 60 bushels of wheat. This she divided with the settlers – it was their salvation, for by frugal, careful managing, it supplied bread for the little settlement all winter. They called it "Salvation Wheat" and when it was almost gone, Sarah put some in a small bottle to show her husband when he came home from his mission. This little bottle of wheat she kept all her life – and years later when her husband, Canute, was buried, this small bottle of wheat was placed in the casket and buried with him.”¹⁰

Pests and conflicts:

Mice and weevil were a constant nuisance. The following excerpt from *History of the Relief Society in Ephraim* relates the story of what happened when the women learned their wheat had been damaged by mice. They decided to sell it to a farmer for seed in the spring, then install cement bins over the summer.

“The wheat of both wards was sold to John Otterstrom in the spring with the agreement that the full price of the wheat and 7% interest would be paid at buying time in the fall. Mr. Otterstrom was stricken ill and suddenly died. The Relief Society officers were

¹⁰ BYU Scholars Archive - A Folk History of the Manti Temple: A Study of the Folklore and Traditions Connected with the Settlement of Manti, Utah, and the Building of the Temple, Masters Thesis Presented to the Department of English, Brigham Young University, by Barbara Lee Hargis, May, 1968. P. 30, oral history “Collected July 6, 1966, Manti, Utah. Florence Peterson Faux, age about 74. Mrs. Faux is a resident of Manti, Utah, and is a temple worker in the Manti Temple.”
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5760&context=etd>

dumbfounded, to say the least, and the general public was loud in its denouncement of the unwise officers.

When Mr. Otterstrom's property was settled, creditors were paid at a percentage on the dollar. The Relief Societies were the preferred creditors and were paid the price of the wheat and also the 7% which enabled them to buy again and come out 300 bushels ahead."¹¹

The female role in commerce:

It is remarkable how much of Ephraim's economy was fueled by women. They were primary drivers of fundraising efforts, collecting in-kind donations that paid for Church construction projects, including the [Manti Utah Temple](#). This was an important building for members of the Church for performing religious ceremonies such as marriages. Local congregations were enthusiastic in gathering resources and they warehoused donations in the Granary. The following excerpt illustrates ingenious methods the women had:

"Everyone had chickens, and 'Sunday Eggs'¹² provided a splendid source of income . . . We are told that 'Hundreds of dozens of Sunday eggs were gathered each summer.' One account says '9,100 dozen and 10 eggs were gathered and donated.' Everyone had cows and donated milk for cheese, and practically all the wool for quilts was given from local sheep herds."¹³

History of the Ephraim Relief Society provides rich details, including this first-person report:

"Marion Dorius has been in charge of collecting Sunday eggs this year. She has done exceptionally well. I've heard that she rewards the children with lump sugar when they bring a heaping full basket of eggs, that's probably the reason the children somehow can't find Saturday eggs."¹²

Women made hand-crafted goods and sold them in the Co-op. They also did many of the services that are provided by businesses today. *History of the Relief Society in Ephraim* describes activities performed by women:

"They washed and laid out the dead . . . And in those days it was no small task to preserve a corpse even for a very short while. There were no morticians, embalmers; and not until later was formaldehyde available. Ice brought from the Sanpitch River in winter and stored in sawdust, was packed in bottles and placed around the body to preserve it. The sisters made the burial clothes also, and the men made rude coffins. Wooden 'horses' were made to hold

¹¹ *History of the Relief Society in Ephraim 1856-1999*. Manti, UT: Universal Impressions, 1999. Found in LDS Church Archives, Secure Stacks, Call # M277.92563 H673 1999

¹² Members of The Church were called upon to donate at least ten percent of their resources as tithing, which was generally paid with grain, eggs, cattle, or other goods. Women devised a system whereby they would collect the eggs their chickens laid on Sundays to donate as tithing. These became known as 'Sunday eggs' and historic records indicate that the idea was both popular and successful in Sanpete County, perhaps more so than in other communities. The book *Charities and Philanthropies: Woman's work in Utah for the World's Fair*, edited by Emmeline B. Wells says this about Sanpete County: "One of the peculiar ways they have contrived for raising means in this county is by putting aside Sunday eggs and using the means for a fund..."

¹³ *History of the Relief Society in Ephraim 1856-1999*. Manti, UT: Universal Impressions, 1999. Found in LDS Church Archives, Secure Stacks, Call # M277.92563 H673 1999

¹² *History of the Relief Society in Ephraim 1856-1999*. Manti, UT: Universal Impressions, 1999. Found in LDS Church Archives, Secure Stacks, Call # M277.92563 H673 1999

the caskets before the internment. The sisters nursed the sick and served as midwives at birthings. They made quilts, wove cloth and made clothing, provided food and shelter for the poor and assisted in various ways in the construction of the buildings.”¹⁴

A ledger from 1881 reports that the Relief Society owned a share in the Co-op valued at \$40.00, along with shares in a thresher, sawmill, straw mill, a knitting machine, a cheese vat, a share in a book called “*Women of Mormondom*,” a silk farm, and machinery used to manufacture silk. They had also amassed 1,150 bushels of grain.¹⁵ By 1893, the Ephraim Relief Society’s grain inventory had grown to 3,580 bushels.

Ownership and function:

The Ephraim Relief Society Granary originally operated as a combined tithing office, Relief Society Granary, and probably also a storage facility for the Ephraim Co-operative Mercantile Association next door. Today these two buildings are situated on land owned by Ephraim City and collectively called Ephraim Square. In 1915, the Relief Society sold it to the Ephraim Milling and Elevator Company and was run for decades by the Hermansen family.

It is noteworthy that Mormon women held the building in a time when it was not common for women to have property in their own names. When the Ephraim Relief Society purchased the Granary in 1899, it became a physical testament to the way these women—who had so little—scraped together the resources for their own building. They did it by gleaning wheat from fields, collecting Sunday eggs, and crafting handiwork. They filled their building with grain and other resources, taking advantage of times when prices were low. With their holdings, they distributed food to the indigent and sold or loaned seed grain to farmers when they were struggling. They saw their grain as sacred, “believing it would be crucial to the survival to church members in the last days.”¹⁶ They independently managed and made decisions about use of their resources. (See section at the end for a report of ownership and title transfers.)

Saving the granary:

After World War II, the roller mill closed, and the two buildings sat vacant for decades. They became an eyesore. This was a time of economic hardship in Sanpete County, when Interstate 15 bypassed the valley and it seemed that progress was moving on elsewhere. During these years, the buildings became bank-owned. Oral histories indicate that if not for the cost of demolition, they would likely have been demolished earlier. The two buildings became a painful reminder of poverty.

On March 27, 1969, the *Ephraim Enterprise* ran a story with the headline, “Historic Landmark to be Razed.”¹⁷ Oral history indicates that a car wash was being planned for the site, and that Richard and Nadine Nibley scrambled to buy time after the bulldozers had already arrived to begin demolition. It

¹⁴ *History of the Relief Society in Ephraim 1856-1999*. Manti, UT: Universal Impressions, 1999. Found in LDS Church Archives, Secure Stacks, Call # M277.92563 H673 1999

¹⁵ Armstrong, Agnes S., and Helen E. Young. *History of the Ephraim Relief Society for the Years Ending 1876-7*. Armstrong, Agnes S., and Helen E. Young. *History of the Ephraim Relief Society for the Years Ending 1876-7*, p. 1. Note: This is a typed manuscript labeled as having been created from original materials on file at Snow College. This copy was found on file in the LDS church Archives.

¹⁶ Derr, Jill Mulvay., Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow. *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-Day Saint Women’s History*. Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historians Press, 2016.

¹⁷ “Historic Landmark To Be Razed.” *Ephraim Enterprise* (Ephraim, Utah), March 27, 1969.

worked.¹⁸ On May 29, 1969, the Ephraim Enterprise and Manti Messenger both ran a short notice with the headline “Ephraim Pioneer Building Saved.”¹⁹

Although demolition plans halted in 1969, there was still community resistance to spending resources that were badly needed elsewhere. So, in 1976, the [Scandinavian Festival](#) was launched to raise money to restore the Ephraim Co-op and Relief Society Granary. This was also an opportunity to generate community interest in preserving Ephraim’s heritage.²⁰

After decades of neglect and restoration efforts that fizzled before gathering steam, the Granary was finally saved in 1990 when champions of “Ephraim Square” secured the support and financing to beautifully renovate these historic structures.

It took grit, thick skin, and creativity. Most of all, vision. Many have said that the turning point was when artist [Kathleen Peterson](#) did a watercolor painting of the Co-op not as it was, but how it should be. She literally painted the picture! Those who had not seen it before, now could. That is the power of an artist’s eye for beauty and the ability to inspire it in others. Kathleen was one of three women neighbors who combined their passion and energy to save the building. Locals, a bit despairingly, called them “the circle sisters” because they lived on the same cul-de-sac. The three women were Kathleen Peterson, Sandra Lanier, and Nadine Nibley.

After the restoration of the building was completed, it became home to the Central Utah Art Center, a gallery and artist studio space. Formed by Kathleen Peterson, she volunteered her time for many years as the director. Sandra Lanier continued to work with the [Ephraim Co-op](#) next door, which became an artist’s cooperative space for local artisans to market their wares. It is still run by the all-volunteer Sanpete Trade Association, which provides retail space and other economic opportunities for artisans.

Granary Arts:

The Ephraim Relief Society Granary, the Co-op, and the [C.C.A. Christensen](#) cabin are owned by Ephraim City today and are collectively known as Ephraim Square.

[Granary Arts](#), a new arts organization, moved into the Ephraim Relief Society Granary in 2014. Granary Arts was formed in 2012 when long-time friends [Amy Jorgensen and Kelly Brooks](#) proposed to create a new non-profit art center in the historic space. Granary Arts grew from the desire to enrich the community and is dedicated to rural roots while reaching out to the global art collective. Granary Arts provides opportunities for artists, curators, makers, students, and educators to foster their creative vision. It operates with support of multiple donors and organizations, including the Utah Division of Arts and Museums and Ephraim City. The primary gallery spaces feature rotating exhibitions and cultural events, while the C.C.A. Christensen cabin behind the Relief Society Granary hosts an [arts fellows program](#).

¹⁸ Stowe, D. “Nibley May Be Retiring, but Not Shy.” *Deseret News*, October 2, 1978.

¹⁹ “Pioneer Building Saved.” *Ephraim Enterprise* (Ephraim, Utah), May 29, 1969.

²⁰ Peterson, Kathleen. (2018). Oral History Interview conducted October 5, 2018 [Interview by Rhonda Lauritzen & Shalae Larsen].

About the Author:

[Rhonda Lauritzen](#) is the founder and a professional biographer at [Evalogue.Life – Tell Your Story](#). Rhonda lives to hear and write about people's lives, especially the uncanny moments. In 2019, she co-authored the historic narrative to nominate the Ephraim Relief Society Granary to the National Register of Historic Places with Shalae Larsen of [IO LandArch](#). Check out Rhonda's latest books: *[How to Storyboard](#)*, and *[Remember When](#)*, the inspiring Norma and Jim Kier story.