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Interview with Ada Murray Conrad:

A descendant of one of Utah's last legal polygamist families, looks back at her life in Wellsville and beyond

from the article "The Last of a Heritage" by Darrell Edward Ehrlick
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Ada Murray Conrad grew up in a polygamist family in Wellsville. Mitch Mascaro/Herald Journal

Sometimes history seems distant, sterile and confined to the musty pages of academic journals and forgotten leather-bound books. Other times, history sits right across from you in a turquoise shirt and jaws on Tom Brokaw: "He had the icing on the cake. He got to do the easy part. He's had an advantage over some of us."

Forgive 92-year-old Ada Murray Conrad. She's read both of Brokaw's books on the Greatest Generation and, well, that whippersnapper television jockey could just pick the highlights of history to write about.

Some people — like Conrad, for one — were too busy living it. Besides, the reserved baritone drone of Brokaw would probably just drain the life out of Conrad's story anyways. And her stories of growing up in a polygamist household, having to be hidden when the Indians came over, and walking her pet pig up and down the streets of Wellsville are just too colorful for the black and white print, the heavy bond, and the conservative cover of Random House's best-seller.

Make no mistake about it, Conrad is living history. She is the last person born to legitimate Mormon polygamists. She is like a fragile flower blossoming in this parched desert state; a rare blossom for people to look at and admire. While they stare at this flower, they appreciate the 92 years which have shaped its petals. What they don't necessarily want to look at are the deep roots that nourished this life.

These are troubling roots. They run deeply into a past which many Utahns have never been able to reconcile. LDS Church members, leaders and historians have fought their polygamist roots, struggling to distance themselves from the controversial practice. Yet those same people, who revile the practice, can't help admiring the tenacity and the determination of those pioneers who sank roots in the salty wasteland and who, by the sheer force of will, planted the seeds of a worldwide religion.

The historical problem can be boiled down to this: How do you admire a flower without acknowledging its roots? Conrad's life story is about her roots which spread out over a great distance of time, experiencing prosperity, scarred by pain and nourished by the soils of Cache Valley.

She was born in Wellsville in 1911 on a farm. Many of the memories that sustain her and many of the experiences that shaped her took place picking beets out of the soil of Cache Valley or herding cows through the rugged Wellsville canyons. Though she's lived outside of Wellsville for many years, she never left.

"Physically, I have not lived there in a long time. Spiritually, I never left," Conrad said. That's the thing about roots, though. They draw strength from sources deeper than most people imagine. They sustain from afar.

So these spiritual roots draw strength from her childhood experiences, her family of 24 siblings and nearly an infinity of cousins, nieces and nephews. She was the last child born to Amanda Murray, her father's second wife. But the polygamy that's splashed across the media today, was not her father's polygamy. Books, magazines and newspapers have decried the polygamist lifestyle, and the government has banned the practice, but let's just get a few things straight: Tom Green is a felon, Colorado City is home to a lot of cults, and polygamy didn't create a society of deviants.

"Of course we were poor, but I was as happy as a bird. I didn't know any better," Conrad said. "It wasn't until six or seven that it ever dawned on me that I had two mothers."

When Conrad realized that she had her mother and her "Aunt Sarah," she asked about it. "My mother said she would explain it when I got older," Conrad said. The time eventually came for her mother to explain the polygamist lifestyle. Unlike some modern portraits of young women being brainwashed or coerced or, at best, indoctrinated, her mother, Amanda, explained that polygamy was part of her faith and heritage. "She told me about having been born into it and raised in it and that it was an order from God. She told me about crossing the plains and that there were too many men whose lives were taken and too many women," Conrad said. Her mother had been one of 32 children. Her grandfather had three wives. Amanda met Conrad's father, William Murray, when she had come to help out with the farm and household. "He must have pulled a Don Juan on her," Conrad said. "...

But her father was having a hard enough time feeding 32 children." Her mother became the second of the two wives William Murray married. Amanda Murray was 21 years old when she married on Feb. 2, 1887, three years before the famous 1890 Manifesto by LDS Church President Wilford Woodruff that banned polygamy from Mormon practice. Polygamy was a conviction, both literally and figuratively.

"She was such a patient angel. I could have never lived a life like her," Conrad said. Amanda Murray believed so fervently in her way of life that she would spend four years underground trying to avoid federal agents who were trying to round up practicing polygamists.

"She told me she changed her name 17 times so no one would recognize her," Conrad said. "A lot of women left because they had nothing holding them. It (the Manifesto) was a lot like a death certificate for some."

Some accounts of polygamists tell of fleeing a family because of rivalries, jealousy and abuse. However, if there were jealousies or hurt feelings, Conrad never saw them. And the roots of both clans protected, strengthened and sweetened Conrad's life. "There had to be tension. I think. I don't know," Conrad said. "Her (Amanda) and Aunt Sarah never had a cross word. There were tensions in daily life, but there were 24 children and money was tight.

"...A lot of people ask the question, 'Do you get along with the other side?' I mean this very seriously: They are my best friends."

Her happiest memories and her best friends were made in the midst of a polygamist upbringing, still Conrad never really considered the lifestyle for herself.

"Even though I never attempted to marry into it, I am proud of the way mother and Aunt Sarah lived it," Conrad explained. Pride didn't always come that easy, though. By the time Conrad entered school, polygamy had been outlawed for over a quarter of a century — time enough for a whole generation not to be familiar with the practice.

“Kids would ask, ‘Why does your Dad have two wives,’... some girls whispered and said, ‘I guess her Dad couldn’t get enough lovin’,” Conrad remembered. “It hurt pretty hard.”

“Enough lovin’” a thinly veiled euphemism for sex. That was the only thing friends and other people saw. What they failed to notice was the back-breaking work that took place every day on the farm. What they refused to see is two branches of the same family living happily with each other. And certainly they avoided looking too closely at the depth of faith it took to make this family function.

“Mother used to thank the Lord for a drink of water; she really would,” Conrad said. “I watched her do it many times.”

Enough lovin’? Who knows. Enough love? Absolutely. “A lot of people like to say, ‘Oh, it was terrible,’ but it wasn’t. Wellsville was the perfect place to grow up,” Conrad said. “And my mother — well, she was perfect.”

Reflecting on nearly a century of history, she is nonplused about major historical events like only a person who has lived through them can be. Those who gaze back at history from the vantage points of fading photographs or by cracking spines of books that haven’t been opened for years tend to imbue the past with some kind of emotional residue that paints these images and words with super-historical significance. Conrad serves as a reminder that these moments in time — World War I or the assassination of John F. Kennedy — were simply a small selection of events in a much larger history. These advances — like the airplane, computer or television — were nothing more than accomplishments that were quickly trumped by the next generation.

Conrad would rather look toward the future and imbue it with a spiritual residue. “When people add up the pluses and minuses in my life, I hope that the pluses add up to more than the minuses,” Conrad said. “By at least one.” While life’s ledger is still being tallied for Conrad, she remains content to quietly refer to herself as “the last of a heritage.”

And that heritage is the kind of history she’s interested in writing about. At 92, she’s mastering an Apple computer, and she has scores of notes on sheets of yellow legal pad paper. Tom Brokaw, eat your heart out. Those pages are filled with stories, reminiscences and lessons drawn to the surface from a source deep inside. Yeah, her roots still call her. Heck, they sing to her. “Like Tony Bennett left his heart in San Francisco,” Conrad said, “I left mine in Wellsville.” Last of a heritage — still, one of a kind.

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