

ZINA AND THE SILKWORMS

By

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When the Lord looks down on us and sees a need that must be met, He finds a way to make a connection between us to fulfill that need. Today in this meeting, we see the Lord's hand in connecting us to President Eyring, Brigham Young, and most of all, Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs Smith Young—and to the silkworm industry.

President Eyring spoke in our October 2021 General Conference about praying behind the silkworm monument in front of our Yalecrest 2nd Ward chapel, to lose his fear of not passing the sacrament correctly. The Lord brought him to us a couple of weeks ago and connected him, indirectly, to the silkworm statue.

President Brigham Young, in 1855, felt a need to increase the production of fabrics for his people and for the women to work and develop their skills as well. While cotton may have been the draw to the southern part of the territory, silk was a subject close to the heart of Brigham Young. He had served a 20-month mission in Manchester, England from 1840-1841. There he was exposed to the many silk weaving looms and silk weavers. His connection to the silkworm industry bloomed. He thought that the production of silk would not only provide the finest of fabrics, but also would be a money-producing product.

The Lord had need for a woman to supervise this new fabric industry and ultimately provided Zina D. H. Young--my great-great-grandmother, a plural wife of Brigham Young who later became the 3rd general RS president--to supervise this new endeavor.

Zina, as president of the Deseret Silk Association, traveled through the territory from Logan to St. George, instructing growers on cultivating mulberry trees to feed the worms, raising the worms, and spinning the silk. She did this faithfully and obediently even though

working with worms was not her first choice. Zina reported nightmares after her first experience with the abhorred silkworms. Ironically, she had a birthmark in the palm of her hand that resembled a curled worm, and she had an inordinate fear of these “creepy-crawlers” for they were a terror to her.

The silkworm process was complex, it and took learning and struggle to raise silkworms in the sisters’ homes. Silkworm eggs, the size of a pin head, required storage below 50 degrees in cellars during the winter. In spring, the eggs were placed on wooden trays in rooms with of 75-80 degrees in women’s homes.

Women even put eggs in bags worn about their necks to provide constant body temperature. One woman, while sitting in church, felt the bag of eggs around her neck wriggling as the worms started hatching. She hurriedly left the meeting to begin feeding the worms.

During the 40-day lifespan of silkworms, their voracious appetites required a supply of dry mulberry leaves, chopped into squares of one-eighth and one-sixteenth of an inch. Worms ultimately, required eight daily feedings for a total of one hundred and twenty pounds each. When the worms reached 3 inches in length, they stopped eating to spin their cocoons.

Silkworms molted four times before spinning a cocoon, requiring larger meals of mulberry leaves with each molting. They then climbed up a stick provided by the caretaker to spin the precious cocoon. The live larva then had to be killed by baking or boiling so the cocoon would not be destroyed as the moth emerged. After two months of drying the cocoons, the tedious job of reeling the silk thread could begin. From there, raw silk strands were twisted together until a fiber of sufficient strength for knitting or weaving is produced.

The silk industry, however, never really materialized as a money-making endeavor. The real benefits provided a unique opportunity for Mormon women to develop organizational skills, financial

expertise, and learn to work cooperatively, with Zina Diantha's leadership at the center.

Now let me connect you to the woman Zina and the understanding of her. She came from a religious family that joined the church because of the teaching of Hyrum Smith and David Whitmer. At age eighteen, she married my great-great grandfather, Henry Bailey Jacobs, had two children, was sealed to Joseph Smith, and then became a plural wife to Brigham Young. In 1848 Zina joined the Mormon Exodus to the Rocky Mountains, finally arriving in the Salt Lake Valley in the Lion House, raised her children there, and lived with Brigham Young until she died.

Once her children were raised, Zina became involved in public service activities. She became a school teacher and studied obstetrics. As a midwife she delivered even the plural wives of Brigham Young. Zina enrolled in herbal medicine classes and home nursing as well. In 1872 she helped establish the Deseret Hospital in Salt Lake, serving as president for 12 years, while she organized a nursing school and taught courses in obstetrics.

In 1868 when the Relief Society was reorganized, Zina was selected as first counselor by President Eliza R. Snow. Zina was seen as complementary to Snow's "keenly intellectual mind" while Sister Zina was "all love and sympathy and drew people after her by reason of that tenderness." Zina became president, after Snow died, and remained RS President for 13 years. She also served as matron of the Salt Lake Temple until 1901. But despite all these obligations, Zina faithfully continued her work with the silkworms.

Zina Young's leadership was a significant factor in Utah's half-century of the silkworm industry. Ponder some of her dedicated successes:

- Utah silk, designed into dresses and shawls, were exhibited at the 1892 Chicago World's Fair and were a stunning success.
- Susan B. Anthony, leader of women's suffrage, proudly wore the elegant black silk dress given to her by Zina Young from the women of Utah for her eightieth birthday.

- In October 1879, Zina gave the first talk given by a woman in General Conference, about the silkworm industry. Pres. Young then asked a woman in the congregation, wearing such a dress, to rise and allow everyone to admire it.
- Zina was president of both the General Relief Society and the Deseret Silk Association at the same time.

Silk production came to an end in 1905, largely as a result of the massive quantity of cocoons necessary—approximately 2,500—to make just one pound of silk.

Through the years, many women enjoyed wearing rustling silk dresses, and wearing silk gloves. However, the silk industry as a money-making endeavor never really materialized. Nevertheless, the most significant yield of the silk home industry was the spirit of adventure, cooperation, obedience, perseverance, and accomplishment of the thousands of participating Relief Society sisters. Zina Young's leadership was a significant factor in Utah's half-century of raising silkworms.

Zina D. H. Young died on August 28, 1901, at age 80.

The legacy of Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs Smith Young is one of obedience, diligence, and service while serving as a leader of Mormon women in Utah. Her tender nature towards Utah women led many to call her "Aunt Zina." Susa Young Gates wrote, "There have been many noble women, past and present, with the Latter-Day work, but of them all, none was so lovely, so lovable, and so passionately beloved as was "Aunt Zina."

Apostle F. M. Lyman gave Zina a blessing a few months before she died, stating,

"You are one of heaven's choicest spirits, and there is none greater on earth than thee, for you have proven your integrity in all things and your salvation and exaltation are secured unto you. You have never complained, and the Lord is pleased with thee. Not one person having one drop of your blood shall be lost but shall in time be brought forth in the celestial kingdom of our God."

I am blessedly related, for I will be with her and connect with her the way the Lord would have me do. Then happily, we can talk together about the silkworms.

I thank the Lord for Zina's life, sacrifices, and dedication to the Lord in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.