

Deseret News

Docudrama highlights faith of Emma Smith

Film on LDS founder's wife opens this weekend

By [Carrie A. Moore](#)
Deseret News

Published: April 11, 2008

Her life, her choices and her motives may have been second-guessed more than those of any other woman in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Now filmmakers have sought to portray what they say is Emma Smith's legacy of faith and perseverance in a new film made primarily for her descendants but opening this weekend to the public in area theaters.

"Emma Smith: My Story," which producers Mike Kennedy and Paul Savage dubbed a "docudrama," premiered Wednesday at Jordan Commons for project insiders and descendants of LDS Church founder Joseph Smith and his wife, Emma. Many of them have only learned of their famous heritage in recent years after being contacted by members of the Joseph Smith Jr. and Emma Hale Smith Historical Society, which originated the yearlong film project.

Producers said the film seeks to portray Emma Smith's joys and sorrows as the wife of a man who declared that he talked with God and restored true Christianity, resulting not only in the birth of a new faith but also, ultimately, in his martyrdom. Events in early LDS history are seen through her eyes — an approach filmmakers say will have wide appeal, particularly to women who have admired Emma Smith but know little about her.

They hope it also will draw men, who may be used to seeing films that view events in LDS history from a male perspective. It chronicles Emma's life from childhood (she was born in 1804) to the death of her husband in 1844.

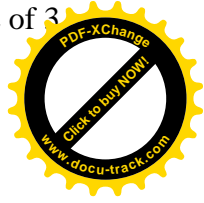
"Our intent was to tell her story the same way Emma would," said Kennedy, the Smiths' third great-grandson. "I've already read the blogs where people were speculating we wouldn't touch polygamy," a practice that Joseph Smith said God commanded him to initiate, and to which Emma Smith ultimately agreed, he said.

"Our purpose was to understand her nature and personality, rather than to interpret how she dealt with (plural marriage). She never really discussed it. She didn't like talking about it."

Kennedy said the film employs one of his own assumptions about Emma Smith in a scene that depicts a dialogue between her and her daughter, Julia, asking why she didn't discuss polygamy and her concerns about other wives. He said he made the assumption that if Emma talked with anyone about the topic, it would be her daughter, not her sons or outsiders.

When her daughter asks about Emma's silence, "Well what good would that do?" is her reply. Kennedy said in the context of the time, he believes the depiction is accurate. "These were not things that you talked about. People were proper. I think she responded in one of two ways: She either didn't talk about it, or she said, 'It's none of your business.'"

"Today we talk about sex far more openly than they did back then."



Kennedy said that, to date, he doesn't know of any writings Emma produced that discuss her husband's polygamy.

Savage said in research for the film, he's come to the conclusion that "Emma stayed consistent with Joseph's public pronouncements through the end of his life," that the practice was a command from God.

"In those days, it had a different definition than what you commonly see today," Kennedy said. "What Joseph Smith had revealed was the celestial marriage covenant. That's very different and distinct."

"Celestial marriage is as different from polygamy as apostate Christianity would be from the restored gospel," Savage said. "Their practice was reflective of a higher law, not the baser aspects of humanity," that are now playing out in news accounts from Eldorado, Texas.

Police there have removed hundreds of children from an FLDS community after allegations of adult men sexual abusing young girls, some of whom allegedly were forced into marriages in their early teens through the use of religious indoctrination.

Though plural marriage was practiced by some early members of the LDS Church, the church disavowed it more than a century ago. The FLDS Church began after some members continued practicing polygamy and broke away from the Salt Lake-based LDS Church.

Folklore about Emma Smith, her relationship with church leaders after her husband's murder and her reasons for staying in Illinois rather than migrating West with the main body of Latter-day Saints often has depicted her as bitter and disenchanted. One of her sons became president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, now known as the Community of Christ.

"Ultimately, the historical society is about trying to arrive at certain truths," Savage said. "We don't have a specific religious creed within the society, but we do think certain things occurred in history. There's been much misperception on both sides (within the LDS Church and the Community of Christ and other eastern branches of the faith). I don't think either side has really captured the whole picture, because we've been hampered by religious prejudice."

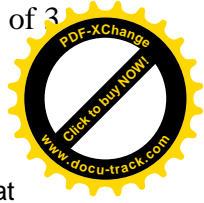
The society was formed to bring together as much existing information as possible about Joseph and Emma Smith from every branch of their progeny "in a way that doesn't infringe on their privacy but allows a broader discussion of their heritage and legacy," Savage said.

The film doesn't attempt to treat every aspect of early LDS history in a technically accurate way, he said, including scenes where Joseph Smith is translating the Book of Mormon. "We're looking to portray Emma's role in those events, her beliefs and convictions," rather than tackling "certain issues that just are too complicated to present in a film format."

She is portrayed as watching her husband learn about religious doctrine and detail as he translates, in awe of what he tells her based on her knowledge of his limited education. "She asks him if Jerusalem has walls — that's drawn from the historical account," Savage said, adding she reflects on "how he would not have been able on his own to produce" the Book of Mormon. "That's part of what was faith-building for her."

Leaders of the LDS Church attended an early screening of the film in mid-March, Kennedy said, as a courtesy for allowing filmmakers to use excess footage from the church's own film, "Joseph Smith, The Prophet of the Restoration." The actors portraying Joseph and Emma are the same in both films, and Kennedy said viewers will see some "strong continuity" between them.

The producers said they can't put a cost estimate on the project because so much volunteer time and labor was used, though they were able to raise a "sizeable amount" in private donations. Comparable production values "would be several million dollars," Savage said. "But we didn't spend near that."



Depending on the commercial success of the film, there are tentative plans to produce a second one that covers the balance of Emma Smith's life, Savage said.

"This was never designed to be on PBS or National Geographic," he said. Rather, the goal was to create dialogue from historical accounts to both educate and entertain the Smiths' descendants and others who are interested.

"This isn't seeing Emma or Joseph from the viewpoint of academics. This is a family perception," Kennedy said.

Once the film premieres in Utah, plans are in place for wider distribution, with premieres in Montana; Independence, Mo.; and Sydney, Australia, where many of the Smiths' descendants live.

For information on the film and the Smith historical society, see www.josephsmithjr.org.

E-mail: carrie@desnews.com

© 2008 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved