Mormonism's Last Colonizer

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On September 25, 1910, forty-eight-year-old William H. Smart took pen in hand and, as he so often did during a ministry unique in Mormondom, wrote a prayer:

My Heavenly Father: Please awaken me to a full realization of the blessing Thou hast bestowed upon me in bringing me along thus far on the Journey of life. . . . Thou didst snatch me from the burnings, Thou didst in me choose a weak thing of the earth to confound the wise. . . . O Father May these my humble but fervent petitions find favor in thy sight even at this most critical time of my life when, having laid down my missionary labors in fields partially nurtured in developments, I now through Thy grace am called and chosen to go into the wilderness as it were, where with the native elements of earth, air and water and kindred resources before me Thou dost invite—yea bid—me to enter, and under Thy guiding hand and with such association as thou shalt be pleased to surround me with, to subdue and colonize the earth unto its reclamation and unto the salvation of Thy children who shall take root herein. Hear me O Father, in this hour of dire need and make me ever equal to my duties, and thine be the glory and honor both now and forever. Amen.

That midlife plea reflects not only his prayerful approach to the challenges he faced, but his motivation and zealousness, his sense of large destiny, his personality, and the style of writing and speech that characterized his adult life. It also speaks of what he had done and what he had yet to do.

His being “snatched from the burnings” referred to a youth and young adulthood of torment, guilt, depression, and failure—including a disastrously ineffective Mormon mission to Turkey and Palestine—caused, among other weaknesses, by his addiction to tobacco.

His transition from failure and self-doubt to total commitment and confident, effective leadership was a classic example of how a “weak thing
of the earth” can be magnified to work with and among, if not confound, the wise.

His “missionary labors in fields partially matured” included his presidency of the church’s Eastern States Mission and of the Wasatch and Uintah stakes in Utah, where he had labored not only for the spiritual salvation of his people but also to build the businesses and municipal services to serve their temporal lives. His future would include the same kind of efforts as president of two more stakes, Duchesne and Roosevelt. Altogether, he gave twenty-six years of his life and dissipated a substantial fortune in virtually full-time church leadership positions.

The wilderness he was called to subdue and colonize was the last extensive area of Utah land available for settlement. In the half century after arriving in the Great Basin, Mormons had occupied all other fertile valleys and had spilled into northern Arizona and southeastern Idaho. The church sent out its last colonies and in 1895 established stakes in northern Mexico and southern Canada, in both cases to provide havens for polygamists. But the 7,500-square-mile Uinta Basin in northeastern Utah was mostly Ute Indian reservation, locked up to whites.

By the turn of the century, white land-hunger made opening the reservation inevitable. As president of the Wasatch Stake, which then included the reservation lands in the basin, Smart could see it coming. At his persuasive suggestion, the First Presidency commissioned him to study the region, locate the best land and suitable townsites, and help the Saints settle there. This time, unlike with earlier settlements, there would be no colonizing call from church headquarters. Smart was pretty much on his own, with the few associates he could recruit—or the Lord would “be pleased to surround me with”—to help.

The tireless zeal with which he set about the task resulted in outraged accusations of Mormon land-grabbing. A federal investigation cleared him and the First Presidency of wrong-doing, though, and by the time the reservation was opened in 1905, he was ready. Settlement on reservation lands was overwhelmingly Mormon. With the reservation open, the church included its lands in the tiny Uintah Stake, with headquarters in the rough, largely non-Mormon frontier town of Vernal, just outside the reservation’s eastern boundary. There, as the new stake president, Smart set out to both modernize and Mormonize the town. The two goals meshed. His strategy was to build its business and municipal establishments, including the first telephone company, the newspaper, and a Mormon bank. His tactics then, as in other towns later, were to bring in Mormons to own or run them. When the recruit had no funds to invest, Smart would lend the money—and often lose it.

After five years, during which time he also labored to establish small Mormon communities on the former reservation, there were enough of
them to justify creation of the new Duchesne Stake. Smart became its first
president. It was then, in 1910, that he wrote of going into the wilderness
“to subdue and colonize the earth unto its reclamation and unto the salva-
tion of thy children who shall take root herein.”

The journey meant leaving the fine two-story brick home he and his wife
Anna had built in Vernal—the Uinta Basin’s first with indoor plumbing—
for living conditions that steadily worsened as he followed his perceived
mission to pioneer the colonization of even the most desolate parts of the
basin. It meant frequent and long absences that left rearing the family
mostly to Anna. It meant watching the substantial fortune he had amassed
as a highly successful Cache Valley sheepman dissipate, drained by his mis-
placed faith in the future prosperity of the basin and his self-sacrificing zeal
to put Mormons on its land and in its businesses.

He entered the basin a wealthy man (in 1918, even with his fortune in
decline, his tithing was the sixteenth largest in the church)¹ and left it thirty
years later in poverty. Unarguably the basin’s most powerful and influential
man, with easy access to church and state leaders, he ended his ministry
there as an itinerant promoter of genealogy, camping out or staying with
church members and hoeing weeds to pay for his board.

Smart was a man born out of time. His life spanned two eras in LDS his-
tory, but he seems to have been committed to the first. During the first
quarter century of Smart’s life, Brigham Young—and, to a lesser extent, his
successor, John Taylor—struggled to build a political, economic, and social
wall that would keep their Mormon empire pure. The railroad, the military,
and federal government pressure ended that. By the turn of the century,
industry—especially mining—and business were largely in non-Mormon
hands, and Wilford Woodruff, the new church president, had opened a new
era of cooperation and accommodation. Although vestiges of it remain,
the “Mormon fortress” mentality was essentially gone. But not in Smart’s
mind. He understood that his mission was to make the Uintah Basin into
Mormon country, and he pursued it with the kind of suspicion of and antip-
athy toward non-Mormons that Brigham had held decades earlier.

A major element of Woodruff’s modernization program was his 1890
Manifesto supposedly ending polygamy. Like many others clinging to the
past, Smart didn’t comply. Twelve years after this manifesto, he took a sec-
ond wife. Even after the 1904 Second Manifesto made plural marriage sub-
ject to church discipline, he continued to practice it openly. As evidence
of the church’s early-twentieth-century ambivalence about polygamy, at a
time when one apostle was excommunicated and another disfellowshipped

¹. Presiding Bishopric letter to Joseph J. Cannon, April 13, 1918, copy in possession of the
author. The letter lists, in order of amount paid, the fifty-two members who paid a thou-
sand dollars or more in 1917 tithing. Charles W. Nibley heads the list, Jesse Knight is sec-
ond, and Smart is number sixteen.
for performing plural marriages, Smart continued in his calling as Wasatch Stake president, and became president, in turn, of three subsequent stakes. His polygamy ended only with the death of his second wife in 1923.

By the turn of the century, the various forms of cooperatives created under the United Order concept had vanished from Mormondom, but not from Smart’s mind. He conceived, wrote of, and attempted to implement an elaborate cooperative plan involving his extended polygamous family and at least one other family; it withered under the practical scrutiny of his second wife. He proposed such a cooperative to his associates in Uintah Basin church leadership, and apparently won their approval. But there was no approval from a First Presidency that had moved beyond such ideas, so Smart finally gave it up.

The style and rhetoric of his journals—and the journals themselves—are reminiscent of earlier times as well. They may be compared to those of Wilford Woodruff as perhaps the two most extensive in the LDS archives. They cover similar lengths of time—Woodruff’s fifty-three years from 1834 to 1887, and Smart’s fifty-one years from 1886 to 1937. Although they were begun earlier, Woodruff’s journals seem more modern in their straightforward, candid, comprehensive reporting of events. Smart’s are more literary, almost biblical-sounding at times, more lengthy, more intensely personal, more self-revealing, more concerned not only with events but also his own relation to and sentiments toward them. While they often express Smart’s feelings of unworthiness for his high and important callings, and ascribe to a higher power credit for his successes, there’s no mistaking his effort to record his motives and actions in a favorable light.

Woodruff wrote that “I have never spent any of my time more profitably for the benefit of mankind than in my journal writing.”2 Smart, striding a much smaller stage, expressed no such pretension, but his journals have their own unique value. They present an intimate view of life in the second level of Mormon leadership, including frequent contact with the First Presidency, long before the church reached worldwide status (when he first became a stake president the church had only forty-eight stakes, with only one, in Canada, outside the United States). They are a primary source for research on Mormon involvement in the opening of the Ute Indian Reservation, on pioneer settlement of its remote and inhospitable lands, and on the struggle to survive there before and during the nation’s worst depression.

Beyond this, they reveal a complex, compulsive, sometimes tortured, often physically ill man, unshakably convinced of the rightness of his calling and its divine source, who through that conviction summoned the willingness to place his incredible energy, his fortune, his very life on the altar.

At age nineteen, Smart submitted himself to a phrenologist for analysis. Among his private papers is the resulting handwritten report. “You will not obtrude yourself upon other people,” the analyst wrote, “but will stand on your own feet manfully.” The second part of that prophecy proved true enough. But the first part could hardly be more wrong. Smart spent most of his life obtruding on other people, lecturing them, reshaping them, calling them to repentance, striving constantly to make bad men good and good men better.

From his journal, the recollections of basin old-timers, and Smart’s own grandchildren a picture also emerges of his private, more human side. He lived in the burgeoning of the auto age but never owned a car or learned to drive one. His views on female decorum and style were nineteenth century as well. He forbade the use of makeup; a granddaughter recalls when he discovered a frosted-glass jar of face powder on her dressing table and hurled it through an unopened window. Modesty was mandatory. Woe to the granddaughter caught rolling down her stockings to above the knee; lectures were stern and long.

He was bald, mostly deaf, tall, and gaunt—the latter not surprising considering the simplicity and sparseness of his diet. He forbade pork in any form. In a rare show of independence, his wife served a pork roast to visiting apostle Francis M. Lyman. Smart was chagrined, quoting the Old Testament to prove this was wrong. Lyman’s rejoinder became a family classic: “President Smart, the Children of Israel were forbidden to eat pork because it was too good for them.” That apostolic reproof didn’t change Smart’s conviction. Bread and milk with honey remained a favorite meal because, he said on at least one occasion, it was what the Savior ate. His chronic gastrointestinal troubles may have been a more compelling reason, however.

Smart seemed to survive on little sleep. His presidency meetings and others frequently ran past midnight, and he usually awoke before dawn. Long early-morning walks before breakfast were customary. Often it was a walk to one of the many solitary places where he had built an altar to kneel, sing hymns, and pray for guidance and strength in meeting the challenges before him.

Singing was an important part of his persona. He and Anna invariably harmonized together at their daily worship. He frequently bemused a congregation by punctuating a sermon by singing, alone and unaccompanied, what he considered an appropriate hymn. Driving his buggy or, later in his impoverished years, riding his mule on his travels around the basin, he could be heard singing hymns. Discovering this proclivity for singing was a surprise to his grandson, who remembered as a child singing “Oh My Father” with his grandfather around the graves of his father and mother in the family cemetery in Franklin, Idaho, and concluding that grandpa, like Heber J. Grant, the church president he so greatly admired, was tone-deaf.
Elocution was a more polished talent. He studied it in high school and, for a couple of weeks in Boston, taught it during his brief classroom career; for many years he gave readings at social events. “Farmer John” and “Tell on His Native Hills” (about William Tell) were favorites. At such events, despite the dignity of his leadership position, he also danced with enthusiasm.

He was a stern and autocratic father, not sparing the rod. Among a grandson’s treasured mementos is the gold-headed walking stick Smart broke over the back of his second, most obedient son, Thomas Laurence. But, his youngest son, Joseph, remembered many lighter moments—casting handshadows of the American eagle and Bre’r Rabbit on the wall, telling tall tales, and singing nonsense ballads like “The Frog Who Would A-Wooing Go.” In his later years he was more reserved. His grandchildren remember him as austere and remote, seldom smiling, indulging in no grandpa-like things such as cuddling, tickling, playing games, or reading stories. Yet they recall his generosity, especially the way he celebrated his birthdays, not by receiving presents and having things done for him, but by giving presents to and doing for others.

Generosity was a word often used by old-timers who remembered how it shrank his fortune. Nevertheless, he was not universally loved. Gentiles and backsliding or lukewarm Mormons resented his single-minded zeal to build his own special kind of society. Even committed Mormons must have had their doubts as they watched grinding economic realities destroy the dreams he had encouraged in them. But pioneering demanded his kind of intensely focused, often arbitrary leadership. Pioneer leaders are more often respected than loved. Even his critics, though, had to know that whatever their early efforts in the Uintah Basin had cost them, Smart, one of Utah’s last pioneer leaders, had given far more.

For a man who built much of the community and business infrastructure not only of Vernal but of Roosevelt and Duchesne as well; who located, established, and nurtured—and in some cases named—many of the basin’s communities; who was arguably the primary moving spirit behind the creation of Duchesne County, Utah’s twenty-eighth, and the determination of its boundaries; who at one time controlled most of the basin’s newspapers; who gave land to build schools and his personal funds to keep them open; who raised the money needed to complete the Uintah Stake Tabernacle that is now the Vernal Temple, Smart is little remembered in the Uinta Basin today. Some thirty years ago, his son Thomas Laurence and a grandson donated a large framed portrait of him to the Vernal Daughters of Utah Pioneers, thinking it would find a place of honor in their small museum. Visiting there five years later, they found it gathering dust in a storage room.

Yet on the farms, in the towns, and especially in the churches where many worship, Smart’s legacy of self-denying service, though not widely recognized, is evident to those who know his history.