Making Indian Land Mormon Country

The Uinta Basin, where William H. Smart would soon plunge into his most difficult and far-reaching labors, and where he would wear out the major portion of his adult life and dissipate his fortune, was Utah’s last major land area permanently settled by whites. Ringed by the Wasatch Mountains on the west, the Uinta Mountains on the north, the Tavaputs Plateau and Book Cliffs on the south, and the Rocky Mountains on the east, it was remote, isolated, and difficult to access.

With rainfall averaging less than nine inches a year, limited and often alkaline soil, and a climate that was either too hot or too cold, it held little attraction for Mormon settlements, as two early explorations had confirmed. By the time the Mormons had occupied all the arable valleys west of the mountains and were hungry for land elsewhere, most of the Uinta Basin had been designated a Ute Indian reservation, locked up to white settlement. The unlocking of the land, in the oft-repeated betrayal of Indian trust and interests, embroiled Smart in the most controversial period of his life.

In language not unworthy of his father’s eloquence, Smart’s youngest son, Joseph, described the land in which he was reared.

The Uinta Basin lies as the open palm of God’s right hand extended southward. The streams that flow between the ridged fingers—the Strawberry, the Duchesne, the Lake Fork, the Uinta, mingle with the waters of the Green, the White, the Colorado and, finally, the Western Sea. The streams are fed from the snows and springs of the High Uintas to the north; they gully the hills, cut deep canyons in the basin’s northern rim and, abetted by frost, wind and flood, scar grievously the basin floor. Tables of sandstone rise from the treeless plain, once the bottom of an inland sea which,
receding, left in the depressions rubble of stone and stinking sloughs of alkali. It is a harsh land, scorched by blistering sun and scarred by wind-driven sand in summer and hammered by Arctic cold and gales of snow in Winter.1

Another testament to the harshness of the land was the story Smart’s son Thomas L. used to tell about the Uinta Basin rancher who sold a quarter-section to an outsider. “How much did you sell that feller?” someone asked. “Well, the deed was for 160 acres. But (in a behind-the-hand whisper) I slipped in an extra ten.”

A prehistoric people called the Fremont roamed the area for nearly a millennium, hunting and gathering in the basin’s vast pinyon-and-juniper uplands, and in the valleys raising corn, beans, and squash in small gardens watered by primitive irrigation ditches. They lived primarily in rock-walled pit houses, and stored their produce in rock-masonry granaries, mud-plastered to keep out rodents. Rock art, painted or chiseled on many cliff faces throughout the basin, especially in Nine-mile and Dry Fork canyons, remains as the most visible and haunting evidence of their presence.

The Fremont culture disappeared around A.D. 1100, probably because of prolonged drought or pressure from the outside, or both. By the fourteenth century, the basin was home to what became known as the Uinta Ute tribe, part of the Ute culture that roamed much of the Colorado Plateau and Great Basin.

In 1925, William Ashley and six members of his Ashley-Henry fur company floated down the Green River into the basin and found what he was looking for—rich beaver sign and friendly Indians. But he also found Antoine Robidoux and his trappers from Taos already there, so he retreated to operate north of the Uinta Mountains. For almost two decades, Robidoux, Etienne Provost, and other trappers from New Mexico dominated the Uinta Basin fur trade—from Fort Robidoux at the confluence of the Green and Duchesne rivers, and Fort Uintah at the confluence of the Uinta and Whiterocks rivers. Finally, in 1844, after years of uneasy peace, the Utes, having had enough of Robidoux’s harsh treatment, burned his fort and killed its occupants. By then the fur trade was about finished anyway; Robidoux quit the business and left the territory to the Utes.2

The major and, as it turned out, irresistible threat to the Indian way of life in the Uinta Basin came not from trappers within the basin, but from

white settlements outside. Within a decade after the arrival of Brigham Young’s pioneer company, Mormons were plowing ground throughout much of western Utah. But this was the homeland of various bands of Ute Indians, ranging from Utah Valley south to the rim of the Great Basin. Despite Young’s dictum that feeding the Indians was better than fighting them, conflict was inevitable as the Indians saw their game driven off and the grass that had been grazed by their horses either turned under the plow or denuded by Mormon cattle. Their resistance led to the Walker War in 1853, and the more widespread and bloody Black Hawk War in 1865–68.

Brigham Young and other territorial Indian agents tried to defuse the problem by establishing Indian farms in Millard, Sanpete, and Utah counties. That didn’t work. Most Indians refused to become farmers, and the government failed to properly support those who did. By 1862, T. W. Hatch, one of several Indian agents who followed Young, reported that the farms were in “destitute condition, stripped of their stock, tools, and moveable fences.” No one, he wrote, was living on them.3

After that failure, the solution was obvious to the whites: relocate the Indians somewhere else. But where? In 1852, Brigham Young sent a five-man party under George Washington Bean to explore the Uinta Basin. They reported that the basin had fine timber, good water, and plentiful game, but little land suitable for cultivation.4 Given that report and the remoteness of the area, Young didn’t act. Nine years later, with land pressures building in valleys west of the Wasatch and with the prospect of a stagecoach line from Denver to Salt Lake City running through the Uinta Basin, he felt differently. “I have been requested several times to permit a settlement of that valley,” he wrote, “but I have never wished to do until now, but now I want a settlement there. . . . The Gentiles will take possession of that valley if we do not, and I do not wish them to have it.”5

Young called a number of families to a colonizing mission, but, in characteristic Mormon fashion, also ordered a more extensive exploration, which produced a report even more negative than the first: “The fertile vales, extensive meadows and wide pasture ranges were not to be found; [the country] . . . is entirely unsuitable for farming purposes, and the amount of land at all suitable for cultivation extremely limited. . . . It was one vast contiguity of waste, and measurably valueless, excepting for nomadic purposes, hunting grounds for Indians and to hold the world together.”6

5. Journal History of the Church, August 27, 1861, microfilm, call #LR 9493 2, LDS Church Archives.
The White Man’s Solution to the “Indian Problem”

So the colonizing call was canceled, and no settlers were sent. Clearly, unwanted land like that was the ideal place in which to relocate the Indians. Isolating them would end the bloodshed. More importantly, from the government’s point of view, it would remove them from Mormon influence that some considered dangerous. On October 3, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln signed an executive order establishing the Uintah Indian Reservation. Congress confirmed his action in 1864. The new home for the Utes was some two million acres, roughly two-thirds the size of Connecticut. It covered the western and middle part of the Uintah Basin, from the Daniels Summit to the confluence of the Duchesne and Green rivers, and from the Uinta Mountains to the Tavaputs Plateau.

Creating the reservation was one thing. Getting the Utes to move there was another. To persuade them to do so, Indian agent Oliver H. Irish convened a council with Ute leaders at the mouth of Spanish Fork Canyon in June 1865. Despite his promise of payment for the lands they would lose, there was opposition to the plan, led by the respected chief Sanpitch. But Brigham Young, generally regarded at that time as a friend to the Indians, advised them to accept the government offer and move to the Uintah Basin. If they did not, he warned, they would lose their lands anyway, without compensation. Twelve of the chiefs agreed to the move. The Spanish Fork Treaty promised sixty years of annual payments totaling $1,100,000, along with food and supplies immediately and homes and schools to be built in the basin. 8

The treaty solved no problems, at least not immediately. The Utes were slow to relocate. Worse, Congress never ratified the treaty; no money was paid and, for years, little other aid was forthcoming. Betrayed, driven from their lands, their game herds depleted, desperate and suffering from extraordinarily harsh winters, the Utes intensified their cattle stealing. The Mormons retaliated, and Chief Black Hawk, with about one hundred warriors, raided ranches and settlements, killing around fifty whites, and driving off some 5,000 cattle. Brigham Young responded with a 2,500-man militia and instructions to the Mormons to “fort up” in larger towns, temporarily abandoning towns as far south as Kanab. After two years of warfare, wounded himself and with many of his warriors dead, Black Hawk finally signed a peace treaty in 1867 and moved his band to the reservation. Other bands soon followed. The move turned out badly for them and their descendants. Converting from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to farming

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7. “Uinta” is the spelling of naturally occurring things: Uinta Mountains, Uinta River, Uinta Basin. The h is added for non-natural things: Uintah County, Uintah Reservation, Uintah Stake, Uintah State Bank, etc.

8. O. H. Irish to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, June 7, 1865, Record Group 75, National Archives, microfilm copy at Brigham Young University Library.
was difficult, and impossible for some. Government Indian agents were generally short-tenured and ineffective. Promised government aid was sporadic at best. For example, in 1866 Agent F. H. Head reportedly complained that “he had no money and that the Utes at the agency were desperately in need of flour and beef, farm implements, and other provisions.” With game on their lands depleted, hunting parties left the reservation but ran into conflicts with whites and were forced to return. Disease, hunger, and discouragement took a heavy toll; by 1877, the Utah Ute population had shrunk from about 4,500 in 1859 to about 800.

It soon got worse. A hundred miles to the east, the White River Utes, equally desperate and feeling betrayed, had had enough of the arrogance of Indian agent Nathan Meeker in trying to force them to become farmers. When Meeker ordered a Ute racetrack plowed up for a farm in 1879, they exploded. Meeker and six employees died in the attack. In the fighting that followed, so did Major Thomas T. Thornburgh and thirteen of his soldiers. Peace was negotiated with the help of Ouray, chief of the Uncompahgre Ute branch to the south, but the “Meeker Massacre” gave miners and others who coveted Indian lands the opportunity they needed.

Under threat of military force, some seven hundred White River Utes were relocated to the already-destitute Uintah Reservation in 1881. For good measure, 1,450 Uncompahgre Utes, uninvolved in the attack, were also moved from western Colorado to a new reservation in the Uinta Basin, on the desolate land east of the Green River. The two reservations were combined into the Uintah-Ouray Reservation. In 1886, to keep the understandably disgruntled Indians under control, Major F. W. Benteen, in command of black troopers of the Ninth Cavalry, established Fort Duchesne.

The Utes had cause for unrest. Not only had they been driven, without compensation, from their homelands, but now even what they had been allotted was threatened. Cattle and sheepmen from Utah and Wasatch counties to the west, as well as from the infant settlement of Vernal to the east, were illegally grazing their herds on the reservation. As early as 1882, Heber Valley farmers began illicitly diverting water from the Strawberry River watershed down Daniels Canyon to their farms. That soon required a 1,000-foot tunnel, hand dug through the Wasatch Mountains, but even that was not enough. By the turn of the century, Utah Valley was even more thirsty, and plans were afoot for a reservoir in Strawberry Valley and tunnels to steal more Ute-owned water.

On the east side of the reservation, a giant, black-bearded horse wrangler named Sam Gilson began experimenting with a lustrous black substance that looked like coal, but melted rather than burned. Gilsonite, as it came

to be called, proved to have many uses—in paints and varnishes, insulation, asphalt tile, brake linings, chewing gum, even for rot-proofing the pilings in the old Union Pacific trestle across the Great Salt Lake. The resulting rush to locate claims and mine the stuff brought the first and only railroad ever to enter the Uinta Basin, fifty miles of narrow-gauge line over the Book Cliffs, on the steepest grades and around the sharpest curves known to railroading anywhere. It also brought the first, but hardly the last, move to strip from the Utes their reservation.

The mining was illegal trespassing, but that small matter could be handled. Assured by affidavits that the land was worthless, Congress in 1888 passed legislation removing 7,040 acres of land from the reservation. The act provided payment of $20 an acre to the Utes, and required their approval. On election day, that approval was facilitated by ample supplies of free whiskey. But one aged woman was clear-eyed about it.

Once my people owned all this mountain country from the village you call Denver in the east to the big lake of salt in the west, from the buffalo plains of the north to the land of the Navajos and Apache in the south. It took many days to ride across our country. You could not see across it, even from the highest mountain. But today I stand on this little hill and I can see all the land the Utes have left. You white men have taken all the rest. Even so, you come to me and ask, will you give me some more of what you have left. I look and I see what you want is worthless. Ponies cannot live here. The ground will not grow squash or corn or melons. Only the prairie dogs and rabbits use it. I will tell my people to sell it for twenty dollars an acre. But I will never agree to sell you any more at any price.11

**Betraying the Utes**

Soon she and her people would have no choice. In 1887, Senator Henry L. Dawes, chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs, had pushed a bill through Congress to “Americanize” Indians by ending tribal ownership of reservations, allotting the land to individual Indians, and putting the rest of the reservation back in the public domain, open to white development. Ostensibly, the purpose was to benefit Indians by protecting them from illegal white encroachment on their lands and giving them citizenship and property rights. For the Utes, the practical result was to open the way for stripping away all but a tiny share of their reservation.

Few Utes accepted their 160-acre allotments, and none gave the required consent to open unallotted land to white settlement. But white land-hunger grew, and so did public pressure. With overblown local boosterism, the *Vernal Express* editorialized that “there is a vast amount of valuable land on

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those reservations . . . that are now being idle and a desert waste merely to gratify the whim of a handful of lazy Indians. . . . After every redskin has taken one hundred and sixty acres each there would be thousands of acres left for white settlers to occupy which would make this portion of Utah one of the most productive sections in the Rocky Mountains.”

From the other side of the mountains, the more restrained but no less acquisitive Deseret News urged that “there are valuable lands and mineral deposits within the boundaries of the reservation, which ought not to be excluded from occupation, cultivation, and development. . . . The time appears to be rapidly passing when large tracts of arable or mineral lands shall be kept as hunting grounds for roving bands of semi-savages.”

Given the history of U.S.-Indian relations, the outcome was predictable. In 1902, Congress gave authority to allot 160 acres of Uintah Reservation land to individual Utes and to open the rest to white settlement, but only by the consent of a majority of the Utes. Consent was never given, but that didn’t matter. In January 1903, in Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Congress had the power to abrogate Indian treaties, so consent of the Utes was not necessary, and that if it was not given by June of that year, the government could allot lands and open the reservation without it.

12. Vernal Express, August 31, 1898.
Smart Enters the Game

All this was being closely watched by William H. Smart, president of the LDS Wasatch Stake, which at that time included the lands occupied by the Uintah-Ouray Reservation. From his ecclesiastical seat in Heber, he envisioned this vast, soon-to-be-open area as Mormon country, and set about seeing that it was. On his own initiative, without his usual practice of consulting with church general authorities but with the rubber-stamp approval of his stake presidency, he made the first of many exploring trips of the Uinta Basin.

On September 2, 1903, he recorded: “I started with a party to make a tour of the Uinta reservation with a view of acquainting myself with its resources from an agricultural standpoint and for settlement. It is expected that it will be opened for public settlement in a year or two and as it lies within our Stake & Co[unty] I feel that we should become acquainted with it.” With a two-horse, canvas-topped wagon, three riding horses, his stake clerk Joseph Musser, his twelve-year-old son William, a horse-wrangler, and a cook, the

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15. Smart, Journals, August 30, 1903.

Uintah Indian Reservation,” Utah Historical Quarterly 50, no. 1 (Winter 1982):68–89.
small party jounced up a crude Daniels Canyon road used mostly by Heber stockmen trailing their cows, illegally, into the basin.

At the summit, the western border of the reservation, with the Strawberry Valley before him, he wrote: “We stopped and I went into the timber and offered prayer. I was filled with peculiar feelings as I knelt down to pray here on the divide between the known and the unknown country, and somehow I felt a responsibility ahead of me. I prayed for light and wisdom.” Light and wisdom he would certainly need, as his efforts to meet that responsibility plunged him into a Mormon/anti-Mormon conflict that reached all the way to Washington, D.C.

The explorers traveled fast. According to Smart’s journal, in one day they journeyed from a spot a few miles short of the Strawberry summit all the way to a camp they then set up on Red Creek—fifty miles over wretched or nonexistent road. The day included a lunch stop at “Al [A. M.] Murdock’s stock camp” in Strawberry Valley. Murdock, whom Smart would later install as the first bishop in Duchesne, was licensed as an Indian trader on the reservation, but not to run cattle there.

During their nine-day tour, they rode down Red Creek to the Strawberry River, and found that the area around the junction of the Strawberry and Duchesne rivers, covered now by Starvation Reservoir, was “one of the favorable places for cultivation.” By this time Al Murdock, who knew the country well, had joined the party. Passing the “Price Road,” they rode on to Fort Duchesne on the Uinta River, about ten miles upstream from its confluence with the Duchesne. The fort, established in 1886 by black troops under the command of Major F. W. Benteen of Custer Massacre infamy, was still garrisoned, but Smart had little to say about it, only that “we walked through Fort. Soil kind of red clay & sand impregnated with considerable alcoli [alkali].” From there they rode up the Uintah River to

16. Ibid., September 3, 1903.
17. Barton, History of Duchesne County, 180–82. Murdock became the first resident and, later, mayor of Duchesne. The infant settlement was named Dora for his daughter, later Theodore for Theodore Roosevelt, finally Duchesne. When the reservation was opened in 1905, he greeted land-rushers with a circus tent from which he sold hay and grain, hardware, and food supplies. His tent and later the frame building that replaced it were used for Mormon church services, town meetings, dances, and basketball. He made loans to many struggling homesteaders, many of which could never be repaid, and, like Smart himself, lost a substantial fortune.
18. Smart, Journals, September 4, 1903. The reservoir got its name from the starvation of an entire herd of A. M. Murdock’s cattle that were snowbound in the area by one of the fierce Uinta Basin blizzards. Barton, History of Duchesne County, 327.
19. This would be the Indian Canyon road built from the Duchesne River bridge to the railhead at Castle Gate. It was little used after black soldiers from Fort Duchesne built the Nine-mile Canyon road from the fort to the Wellington railhead. Ironically, while the Nine-mile Canyon road today is unpaved, dusty, and little traveled, U.S. Highway 191 follows the Indian Canyon road.
20. Smart, Journals, September 5, 1903.
the reservation headquarters at Whiterocks, where they found that the “soil generally looked favorable and covered with thrifty vegetation. Many good buildings at agency & things looked in orderly condition.”

The next day, leaving the others at the agency to rest, Musser and Smart rode some twenty-five miles over rough country to the tiny settlement of Vernal, where they stayed with Uintah Stake president Samuel R. Bennion. The stake was a small one, consisting of one ward, Vernal; a tiny branch at Ashley, eleven miles northwest of Vernal on Dry Fork; another at Jensen, where Isaac Burton operated a ferry over the Green River, and a few scattered ranches. But Smart could see possibilities. “This is beautiful valley watered by Ashley River,” he recorded. “Was desert like before irrigated. Raise many varieties of fruits & all kinds of cereals.”

21. Ibid., September 6, 1903.
22. Ibid., September 8–11, 1903.

After attending a fast-day worship service in the Vernal Ward, Smart and Musser headed for home, picking up the rest of the party at the Whiterocks agency. They traveled generally north of their outbound route, against the foothills of the Uinta Mountains. He described “beautiful sandy loam but rocky” in Uinta Valley, “some good land” in the Lake Fork country, and “highly mineralized” land in parts of the Duchesne River Valley. “We got right up near the foot hills where was much good country but high in elevation,” he reported. “I felt today that some of the table lands over which we passed [between Rock Creek and the Duchesne River Valley] would perhaps grow winter wheat without irrigation.” Barely avoiding early fall snowfalls, he arrived home with his hands swollen and rheumatic, but feeling “very well satisfied with trip feeling that I got a good idea of country.”

The next two months were busy with church and business affairs, and a trip to Idaho to look after the sheep business and family matters. Then, on November 13, 1903, he met with the First Presidency and apostles John Henry Smith and Hyrum M. Smith in a conference that determined where and how he would spend the next thirty years. His journal leaves little doubt that he got the decision he wanted and expected, and that, like Smart himself, the First Presidency considered the Uintah Basin to be, rightfully, Mormon country. Smart first discussed the efforts of his people to locate reservoir sites on the Provo River headwaters. Displaying a map of Wasatch Stake and its inclusion of the reservation,

I then related my trip with the brethren over the reservation of Uinta this fall to acquaint ourselves with land and water with view of colonization when reservation is thrown open, and explained in general the tillable land and water to cover it as I viewed it. I then asked the question as to whether it is desired that the Wasatch Stake authorities father the colonization of that portion of the reservation lying within Wasatch Co[unty] . . . or if it would be done from the Uinta Co[unty] side. Pres Smith emphatically
counseled that it be colonized under the direction of the Presidency and
the High Council of the Wasatch Stake and his decision was approved by
the other brethren present.

After that validation of his efforts, and with President Smith’s assurance
that he wanted him to remain as Wasatch Stake president, Smart wrote: “I
went away with joy and a greater contentment in my heart than I had felt
before & felt to press on with greater zeal than ever before.”

His greater zeal would take him personally on at least three more explo-
rations of the reservation before it opened, and others later. His critics later
charged that the trips were “secret” or “clandestine,” but those charges seem
overblown. The evidence doesn’t show that he hid his actions—he visited
agency headquarters and the army’s Fort Duchesne on his various trips—
but he certainly didn’t advertise them. In any event, their purpose is clear:
to locate good farming land, townsites, water sources and canal routes, and
other essentials of settlement so as to give Mormons a crucial advantage
when the time came. Although he would bear the brunt of the firestorm of
criticism his colonizing efforts fanned, his journal entry on May 12, 1904,
makes it clear he felt he was doing just what his church leaders wanted.

This morning about 9–15 I called upon Pres. Jos. F. Smith at his office
to converse regarding settling of Uintah Reservation when thrown open
in as much as upon a previous visit he had given me the responsibility of
fathering this work. I told him that in as much as there would be a rush
of all kinds of people to file upon lands and settle it seemed to me that
matured plans should be made for our people to do so, and that plans
should be effected whereby we would be in readiness to go in there and at
once proceed to lay off towns, canals, build mills etc to inhabit the land,
and that therefore I had to suggest that I be given liberty to get together
enough saints—a hundred or so—to do this. He said that he would like
to see Utah settled up by our people instead of their going off to other
states and that I should go forth and use arguments by way of pursuasion
to get our people to settle there. . . . He told me to go ahead and lay plans
to people and build up the reservation. When I asked him if it would be
well for an apostle to be named to assist me or should I go ahead and
come to him for advice, he said it was not necessary to appoint an apostle
and that I could feel free to advise with him at any time. He however said
that in as much as apostle Geo. A. Smith is a general land officer and has
understanding of these things I could advise with him and obtain what-
ever information I could from him. As I bade him good day I told him
I had the spirit of doing this work and he said that I should do good in

23. Ibid., November 13, 1903.
24. Jenson, Biographical Encyclopedia, 3:776–78. At age 28, George Albert Smith was appointed
receiver of the local U.S. Land Office by President McKinley in 1898 and reappointed by
President Theodore Roosevelt in 1902. He became an apostle in 1903 and president of
the LDS Church in 1945.
it and as he shook my hand I felt that he meant it and I rejoiced in this manifestation of his confidence.

He would need help, though, and he sought it in his customary way, through prayer. “Now, O Lord,” he pleaded, “thou knowest the weaknesses of thy servant and his little knowledge of building and I beseech thee through my humility and good desires to assist in building up Zion to make up to me what I lack and open up the way before me that I may be enabled to accomplish this work in righteousness.”

He also sought help from Smith and from another prominent Mormon, Surveyor-general Edward H. Anderson. Both responded that “while they could tell me little now yet they both said they would render me what assistance they can in reservation matters in future.”25 Apostle Reed Smoot, still embroiled in a fight to claim the Senate seat to which he had been elected in 1902, promised that “whatever information comes to him he will keep me posted.”26 Such insider contacts helped fuel later charges of a Mormon conspiracy to dominate settlement on the reservation.

Now feeling he had a formal commission from President Smith, Smart organized his next exploration of the reservation. His first move was to recruit the backsliding Alva Murdock to organize and manage the trip. There was an ulterior motive that tells much of how Smart worked with people. “For a long time—almost from the first of my mission here,” he wrote, “I have felt a desire to see Alva Murdock . . . take hold and work in the Church. . . . he has done nothing since a boy. . . . I called him in to my office this morning and told him that I feel that the Lord wants his services and that if he would accept of it I desired him to be one of my assistance in my trip over the Reservation. . . . He promised to help me so I put him in charge of the outfit and told him whatever was needed for him to get together and I would pay for what he has to buy.”27 That was the beginning of Murdock’s lifelong service to his church.

Smart enjoyed a fringe benefit as well; he took his entire family for a week-long outing at Murdock’s camp in Strawberry Valley on the reservation while the exploration went forward. Through President Smith he invited any general authority who wished to do so to join the outing. None did.

On horseback, with two pack mules, Smart and Murdock spent two weeks exploring as far south as Nine-mile Canyon, where they lunched at Preston Nutter’s cattle ranch; as far north as the headwaters of Lake Fork, where, as any modern hiker on the south slopes of the Uintas will

25. Smart, Journals, May 26, 1904. Anderson, a member of the church youth organization’s general board, had been city recorder of Ogden and a state legislator. President McKinley nominated him, and the U.S. Senate confirmed him, as surveyor-general of Utah in 1901. Jenson, Biographical Encyclopedia, 1:715.
27. Ibid., August 1, 1904.
understand, he found the yellow pine to be “fine, very straight.” and the country “very rough with large boulders & timber down.” They rode into a “large, rough basin [East Basin] in which we found 6 beautiful little lakes.” He described one “very fine reservoir site” and then, lower down, a “beautiful lake covering from 75 to 100 acres . . . river runs through it. Another splendid opportunity for reservoir i.e. the lake to be made into one.”28 That would be Moon Lake, later expanded into an important reservoir as Smart foresaw.

From there, they climbed the ridge to the west and descended into the Rock Creek watershed, describing what are now known as the Grandaddy Lakes. In that beautiful country, Smart experienced something of an epiphany. “When on the ridge alone,” he wrote, “I had very deep emotions. I thought of science & the gospel flowing down to man, of nature breaking down cliffs and preparing for redemption. I desired that my inner life might take on same preparation. I felt this sight one of the greatest of testimonies and knelt down and poured out my soul in gratitude to God for these sights and impressions. I gathered some little flowers and pressed them in my testament.” Descending the next day to the canyon mouth, he reported: “We had today wild raspberries, thimble berries, choke cherries, service berries, currants, gooseberries; there were also grapes and hops. This leads me to think that the country below would raise fruit. Soil sandy.”29

Locating potential townsites was one of Smart’s major goals throughout most of his Uinta Basin ministry. On this trip he identified two. The Duchesne River bottoms, in the area of its confluence with Farm Creek, he “felt would be adapted to a village, ground sandy and warm. Little snow in winter.”30 The village of Hanna is there today, but its residents may not entirely agree with Smart’s description of “little snow.” Near the confluence of the Duchesne and Strawberry rivers he had an even stronger impression. After studying the land between the two rivers and the land up and down the two river valleys, he wrote: “I felt that perhaps here . . . may become the centre place of a Stake of Zion when the reservation forms more than one. As these thoughts came my being was quickened with emotion and interest.”31 That is precisely the site of the city of Duchesne, the center (but not for some years the headquarters) of Duchesne Stake, the church’s sixty-second stake, with William H. Smart as its first president when the Uintah Stake was divided in 1910.32 Ten years later, when Roosevelt Stake was created and the reservation had “more than one,” Duchesne became the headquarters of Duchesne Stake.

28. Ibid., August 23, 1904.
29. Ibid., August 25 and 26, 1904.
30. Ibid., August 27, 1904.
31. Ibid., September 5, 1904.
Visiting the reservation agency before returning home, Smart learned that there were about nine hundred Indians on the reservation. His observation was that “government doing nothing only feeding them & poorly teaching them to work. Kill 30 beeves monthly for them. They are amorous, gamblers & largely paupers.” Ignorant of, forgetting, or ignoring that the reservation was established to get them away from the Mormons, he proposed a solution for the sad conditions he witnessed: “My impression is that our people should have control of agency and labor for Indians morally, spiritually, intellectually and temporally.”

Back home, he met again with Surveyor-general Anderson, who described how a lottery system to select lands would work: the higher the number drawn, the higher the priority to select land, with the selection to be made within sixty days. Anderson advised him to “become acquainted with location of townships or sections where we want to locate and be able to locate same on map and be prepared to select same.”

That advice added urgency to Smart’s efforts, and within a month a third exploration was underway. This time, with approval of the First Presidency, a soils expert from the Utah State Agricultural College research station was added “to make an agricultural analysis of the soil & water of the reservation to ascertain its adaptability to various crops etc.” He was W. W. McLaughlin, in Smart’s words “not a member of our church, but friendly and seemingly nice man.” When the government refused a permit for the college to send such an expert, Smart urged college president William Kerr to send one anyway, and Smart would arrange for the permit. Kerr, a Mormon, complied.

Fortuitously, another essential need was filled when Andrew J. Stewart of Provo appeared, bearing a letter of introduction from Apostle George A. Smith. Stewart had already surveyed about a fourth of the reservation. “He is interested in locating people from a business standpoint,” Smart wrote. “He desires to work in harmony with me. . . . I had been desiring to find a surveyor who is good L.D. Saint to assist me in this work and rather feel that the hand of the Lord is in the matter.”

The three men, with Lewis Simms of Heber, set out on October 20 with saddle horses, a buggy, and a heavy wagon with tools and supplies. Smart summarized their thirteen-day trip in a single journal entry that shows his growing competence as a colonizer, particularly in the all-important task of locating and getting water to lands for Mormon settlement.

We covered the agricultural portion of the reservation quite thoroughly Prof. McLaughlin taking soil samples at various points. . . . Bro Stewart and I riding south of the Duchesne farther than I had hitherto had done discovered a large area stretching toward the Green River of agricultural and

33. Smart, Journals, September 3, 1904.
34. Ibid., September 20, 1904.
35. Ibid., September 26, 27, and October 13, 16, 1904.
mineral land. The country grows more extensive at each visit. As I see it now there are the following general irrigation systems to evolve: The Strawberry and Duchesne System Canal to irrigate South of and along either side of Duchesne River. The Blue Bench Canal system for Blue Bench & adjacent territory. The Lake Fork System to cover land on either side of this River. Perhaps upper Rock Creek to cover upper land between this and Lake Fork. The Joint Uinta and Lake Fork system to cover Dry Gulch country and adjacent. The Duel Uinta River system to cover both sides of the Uinta River.36

Once again he made his purpose perfectly clear: “I still feel the necessity of our people making a united struggle to become in possession of this land and water and I still feel desirous of being an humble instrument in Father’s hands of assisting to bring this about.”

The First Presidency continued to support that effort, writing on December 10, 1904, a request to Senator Reed Smoot that he give Smart any available information regarding the reservation opening “or otherwise render timely assistance.”37

With the opening date fast approaching, Smart intensified his preparations. His stake presidency debated whether to organize a new development company on the reservation or operate through their highly successful Wasatch Development Company. They decided on the latter course, but chose to establish a branch of the company on the reservation under direction of Reuban S. Collett, a counselor in the Uintah Stake presidency. Seeking to share responsibility, Smart appointed the following officers: Joseph R. Murdock, his first counselor in the Wasatch Stake presidency, as chairman of the company’s executive board; his stake clerk, Joseph W. Musser, as vice chairman; and his second counselor, James C. Jensen, as auditor.38 Clearly, Wasatch Development was to remain a Mormon enterprise, and, just as clearly, Smart, as president, remained in control. “I enjoined upon them the extended duties of the Co. in taking up reservation work,” he wrote.

With that injunction in mind, Murdock and Moffett, together with surveyor Andrew Stewart, left for the reservation two days later. Their assignment was specific and audacious: “to select Town sites and labor with the officials to have such set aside for that purpose.” They returned two weeks later and reported “having been comparatively successful.”

But townsites and homesteads would be worthless without water. Smart’s Wasatch Development Company had earlier filed on water on the Duchesne, Lake Fork, and other rivers. Three weeks before opening day, Murdock led another exploring party, this time “to locate irrigation canals, lands, etc., preparatory to assisting in the colonizing after the opening.”39

36. Ibid., November 4, 1904.
37. Clark, Messages of the First Presidency, 4:92.
38. Smart, Journals, June 6, 1905.
39. Ibid., August 5, 1905.
In his single-minded determination to foster homesteading and development in the basin, Smart got involved in two important land-use issues. One would determine the future utilization and degree of protection of the Uinta Mountains. In 1897, to protect its watershed from overgrazing and timbering, the 482,000-acre Uinta National Forest Reserve was established by presidential proclamation. With the opening of the reservation, it was proposed that 1.4 million acres, basically all the forested part of the Indian land, be added to the forest reserve. Governor Heber M. Wells strongly supported this withdrawal. In his message to the legislature, he declared that “without any restrictive provisions against the lavish and wanton destruction of the forests in those mountains, the prosperous farms and villages that border at least three of these main rivers of the State must suffer and perhaps go into decay.”

Unaccountably, Smart opposed the addition of this land to the reserve. As president of Wasatch Stake, he had been involved in bringing water from those very mountains to the farms and homes of his people. He knew the importance of protecting the watersheds. And certainly he knew that the future homesteaders for whom he was working so hard would settle on lands watered by the rivers coming from the mountains, not in the mountains themselves.

Yet his newspaper, the *Wasatch Wave*, editorialized that the withdrawal would hamper the homesteader, and “it will be next to impossible to build a comfortable home on the newly opened lands, if the present forest reserves in this county may be taken as a criterion to go by.” Fortunately, such opposition failed. The withdrawal was made, along with another 200,000 acres added by President Theodore Roosevelt later that year, and created the national forest we know there today.

Smart’s other land-use battle was over a proposal to create a state park in Strawberry Valley. Brigham Clegg persuaded the Republican Party to include the park’s creation in its state platform, arguing that city dwellers needed a place to renew their souls in nature. Smart was indignant over the prospect of losing to a state park land that could be used instead for homesteading, mining, or other development. His *Wasatch Wave* editorialized that the lower elevations of the valley contained rich farming country, while the surrounding mountains were “said to contain one of the richest mineral belts in the state of Utah.”

In language foreshadowing the rhetoric condemning President Clinton’s creation of the Escalante-Grand Staircase National Park in 1996, the *Wave* declared: “This park will be of no use whatever to the people of this county. It would be a nice place, we admit, to spend a few days in the summer, but

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can this government afford to set apart a country that is capable of producing hundreds of thousands of dollars of wealth each year, for the exclusive use of a few lisping dudes with fishing pole and eye-glass?”

Smart and his supporters won this one; no park materialized. But neither did the mineral wealth he visualized, or much of the rich farming lands.

An “Insane”—but Successful—Letter

Although for some reason he did not record this critically important decision, Smart and his counselors chose a course of action that would elicit a storm of criticism that filled newspapers throughout the country, and even brought official attention from Washington, D.C. The decision was to write to stake presidents, inviting their members to seek the best lands on the reservation, pointing out the church’s desire that young people stay to build up Zion rather than seeking livelihoods elsewhere, and promising to help them. Among other places, the letter was published in the Box Elder News to alert Mormons there to the opportunity.

The Salt Lake Tribune, ardently anti-Mormon at the time, seized upon this and launched a full-throated attack not only on Smart and his associates, but also on the First Presidency and Senator Reed Smoot. On July 2, 1905, it published the letter in full.

Heber City, Utah, June 7, 1905

Dear Bretheren:

In as much as the Uintah reservation territory is nearly all within the confines of Wasatch county and over which our ecclesiastical jurisdiction extends, it is desired by the first presidency that we use our good offices in behalf of our people who may wish to settle there. It is presumed that the opportunity for registering will commence on July 1, when all contemplating procuring land upon the reservation will be required to register in person, after which a time will be designated when the drawing will commence. While the manner of drawing will be such that each person will stand an equal show, and we therefore cannot assist in procuring certain pieces of land for individuals, yet we are acquainting ourselves with tracts of land which we feel are most desirable for settlement, and which, through land office connections being formed by us, can be chosen by those who may be in touch with us [emphasis added]. The region is amply watered and there is sufficient good agricultural and grazing land to sustain a large population. You will call to mind that it is deemed inadvisable for our people to seek new homes afar off when such tracts as these await the reclamation of the husbandman, and are located within the confines of Utah, the center piece of the Lord’s establishment of his people in the West. Our reason for now communicating with you is that should you feel in harmony with our mission, you immediately help us as our fellow laborers by taking the matter up

with your bishops, ascertaining who among their numbers desire to draw for these lands, and in a systematic way get us in touch with them by correspondence at the very earliest date possible. It is not deemed wise for families having good homes, and who are satisfied with their surroundings to pull up stakes and move to other places; but there are many young men and middle aged, who have little or no holdings where they now reside, who are ambitious to create homes and are prone to establish themselves in new communities where they can grow up with the country. It is to this class as is more especially desired that we appeal. Detailed instruction will be issued from the Government office giving a clear understanding of the mode of procedure in securing land upon the reservation, and we shall be pleased to assist your people in every way possible in the premises. By giving this matter your earliest attention you will confer a favor upon your fellow laborers in Christ.

William H. Smart
Joseph R. Murdock
James C. Jensen
Wasatch Stake Presidency

In the same edition of the Tribune, a long news story and an editorial condemned Smart, his stake presidency, and the First Presidency for illegal actions aimed at grasping “absolute control of the Uintah Basin and Indian reservation.” Referring to the passage italicized above, it accused the stake presidency either of having illicit connections with the land office to give Mormons the best lands or “playing a bunco game upon the saints.” It asked how Smart and his associates were able to explore the reservation “when everybody else is kept off.” Smart’s letter to the stake presidents, the Tribune charged, “completely establishes the fact that there is a conspiracy among the Mormon hierarchy to steal the lands of the reservations when the opening comes.”

Following standard newspaper practice, the Tribune informed Smart the letter was to be published, and invited him to explain. He assigned Jensen and Musser to draft a response and telephone it to the paper that same day. Published under the heading “ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN: President Smart Declares It Is Really a Small Matter,” it read,

President William H. Smart, the first signer of the “Reservation directive,” made the following statement to the Tribune by telephone from Heber City last night:

“Through the courtesy of the Tribune management I am today informed that it is your intention to publish in tomorrow’s issue a communication addressed to presidents of stakes by the presidency of the Wasatch stake of Zion relating to the opening of the Uintah Indian reservation. We were

43. Wasatch Stake Presidency to stake presidencies, June 7, 1905, original letter in Smart Papers.
surprised that importance warranting its publication should be attached
to our letter.

“The statement that ‘it is the desire of the first presidency that we use
our good offices in behalf of our people who may wish to settle there’ had
reference to the policy that has obtained in the church from its organiza-
tion that the presiding officers of stakes or wards shall take an interest in
the material upbuilding of their respective districts in behalf of mankind
in general. The first presidency of the church has issued no instructions
regarding the course we should take in connection with the settlement of
the reservation, and we have quoted them in the said communication only
upon the authority of the general policy above referred to.

“The second point brought up was the clause relating to ‘land office
connections being formed by us.’ By said statement we merely intended to
call attention to the fact that we expected through business connections to
get in touch with land office attorneys and surveyors who will have offices
at Vernal, where the United States land office is located, and who will assist,
under the rules and regulations governing the opening of the reservation
in preparing the necessary papers and locating settlers upon lands selected
by them, and through which connections we expect to be advised as fast as
entries are made, and thus keep informed as to land still available.”

The explanation didn’t satisfy the Tribune, of course. Its barrage of crit-
icism continued for weeks, fanned, no doubt, by the animosity of pub-
lisher Thomas Kearns because the church had withdrawn its support for
his reelection to the U.S. Senate in 1905. The language became shrill and
personal, condemning not only Smart, but also Senator Reed Smoot, whom
Kearns blamed, probably rightly, for his own senatorial defeat, and particu-
larly church president Smith.

Quoting phrases in the letters to stake presidents, the paper fumed that
“the impudent interference assumed by the Wasatch presidency ‘is desired
by the First Presidency,’ to the end that ‘our people’ may get the land. It is
the most daring encroachment upon the Government’s prerogatives, the
most insolent attempt to thwart by underhand means, the efforts of the
Government to give every land seeker a square deal, that has developed
under the present odious presidency of Joseph F. Smith.”

Although rhetorically outgunned, the church-owned Deseret News tried
to respond. Referring to the involvement of women of the anti-Mormon
American Party in the controversy, it asked, “What can be thought by
decent people of the ministerial and journalistic deceivers who, not con-
tent with making ninnies of themselves in their furious assaults upon an
imaginary ‘hierarchy’ tricked a number of ladies of this city into assuming
an absurd position before the country and exposing themselves to public
ridicule?”

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44. Salt Lake Tribune, July 2, 1905.
Oddly, for two weeks Smart’s journal is silent on the issue, reporting instead on various church meetings and a Fourth of July oration he was invited to deliver: “I was measurably satisfied and the audience appeared to be. Spoke about forty five minutes.” But on July 16, having received an official letter from Washington demanding an explanation, he could ignore it no longer. On that date, his journal commented on the publication of the letter to stake presidents and complained that “since publishing it they [the Tribune] have been traducing us and the first presidency most shamefully charging us with intention to become in possession of the lands fraudulently. They finally succeeded in getting the Women’s side of the late American political party which was organized to fight our people, to hold a meeting [and] pass resolutions against our action [in] sending the letter. This resulted in the following letter from W. W. Richards, Commissioner U.S. Land office of Washington, D.C. being sent us.”

July 11, 1905

Messrs. WH Smart, Jas. R. Murdock and James C. Jensen
Wasatch Stake Presidency, Heber City, Utah

Sirs:

I enclose herewith a newspaper clipping which shows what purports to be a letter addressed by you to Pres. Oleen U. Stohl and Counselors of Brigham City, Utah. In the letter you call attention to the proposed opening of the Uintah Indian Reservation and to land office connections being formed by you which will enable you and your people to choose certain tracts of land such as you deem most desirable for settlement. This letter of yours has been printed in the newspapers generally throughout the country and I have to request that you inform me at once what you mean by “land office connections being formed by you.”

Very Respectfully,
W. A. Richards
Commissioner

Smart’s response, with copies sent to senators Smoot and George Sutherland and congressman Joseph Howell, was prompt and apparently persuasive.

Hon W. A. Richards

Com. Gen’l Land Office
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

We beg to acknowledge receipt of yours of 11th just, wherein you ask what we meant by the term, “land office connections being formed by us” quoted from our communication to Pres. Aleen N. Stohl and counselors referring to the prospective opening of the Uintah Indian Reservation.

46. Smart, Journals, July 4, 1905.
We feel indebted to you for the opportunity of explaining this statement in as much as the language used therein has been misinterpreted by some of our local newspapers and citizens.

By the statement in question we merely meant to convey the information that we expected to be in touch with land office attorneys and civil engineers operating under the legitimate exercise of their professions, and under the rules and regulations governing the opening of the Reserve.

By reading the entire paragraph from which you quote, and wherein we state that “the manner of drawing will be such that each person will stand an equal show, and therefore we cannot assist in securing certain pieces of land for individuals”, in connection with our explanation herein given, we trust that it will appear clear to you that it was not the intention to convey the idea that we were in collusion with United States land office or proposed to operate in any unlawful manner.

The Construction placed upon your excerpt by those taking was so foreign to our real intent that we unwittingly made use of it without noting that it was susceptible to double construction.

Trusting this explanation will be satisfactory

We are
Very respectfully
Wm Smart
Jos. R. Murdock
Jas. C. Jensen

The government’s concern about the matter stopped short of the Congressional investigation demanded by the Tribune and the women’s auxiliary of the American Party. Richards made his own brief investigation, though, and absolved Smart, Senator Smoot, President Smith, and land officials in Utah and Washington of any wrongdoing. The national embarrassment of the church hierarchy wasn’t lightly suffered by some, however. Apostle John Henry Smith, for one, called Smart’s action “insane.”48 As for Smart, he was contrite, but confidently hopeful. “While we depurate the trouble our letter has made,” he wrote, “yet we hope that in some way our indiscretion will be turned by our heavenly Father to the good of his work.”49

The Land-allocation System

He was about to find out. August 28, 1905, the date President Theodore Roosevelt had designated for opening the reservation to homesteading, was fast approaching. The stampedes of previous land rushes—with their confusion, fighting, chicanery, accidents, and death—had taught the government something. This time the procedure was carefully planned to avoid anything

47. Journal History of the Church, July 22, 1905.
49. Smart, Journals, July 16, 1905.
like a stampede. There would be a two-week period for land-seekers to register at temporary land offices set up in Provo, Price, and Vernal, Utah, and Grand Junction, Colorado. Place or priority of registration would make no difference; names from all four registration places would go into a single large rotating box to be randomly drawn. Each registrant would be given a permit to enter and scout out the reservation during a two-week period; there would be no selection of land at this time, so there would be no reason for haste. When the drawing was held, successful applicants would be assigned numbers based on the order of the draw and allowed back on the reservation to select and file on their 160 acres. Only a limited number would be allowed to enter each day—the higher the number, the earlier the entry. On opening day, August 28, registrants with the highest 111 numbers would be admitted, with others following during the next two months.50

The lure of free land for the taking was strong, and officials expected 100,000 or more registrations. Anticipation was high. Provo mayor William M. Roylance, for example, urged his people, especially the merchants, to prepare speedily for the “great rush,” which he predicted would be “one of the great events in the history of Provo.” He called for cleanup of front and back yards and of city streets, because “Provo is noted for doing things right, and we must keep up our high standard.”51

Entrepreneurs set up tent cities to house visitors—twenty-five cents a cot. Dining rooms were set up in the Mormon tabernacle and various ward houses, with outdoor tables on the courthouse square. Joseph R. Murdock, of Smart’s Wasatch Development Company, set up shop to assist land-seekers—Mormons, of course, preferred. With all the outsiders coming to town, many of them non-Mormons, church president Joseph F. Smith and apostle Reed Smoot warned residents to lock their doors and windows, and especially to watch over their children.52 In addition to its other preparations, Grand Junction brought in Pinkerton agents to bolster its police force.

On the opening day of registration, August 1, Provo counted some 5,000 extra people in town. Fourteen hundred more arrived the next day on a special train from Sanpete County. Long lines formed in Provo and Grand Junction, less so in Price and Vernal. When the process ended on August 17, more than 37,000 persons had registered: 18,858 in Provo, 15,387 in Grand Junction, 1,500 in Price, and 1,400 in Vernal.53 The number was only about a third of those expected. Still, with that many people now permitted to explore it, roads to the reservation were crowded for two weeks with eager would-be homesteaders.

50. The selection procedure and the conditions under which it worked out are best described in Fuller, “Land Rush in Zion.”
53. Ibid., 242.
The crucial drawing began August 17, under careful arrangements prescribed and overseen by U.S. Land Commissioner W. A. Richards to ensure fairness. An eight-foot box, the ends thirty-one inches square, mounted on bearings to allow rotation, stood on a raised platform outside the Proctor Academy in Provo. It contained 37,000 registration forms, representing the hopes of that many land-seekers. On each side of the box were four six-inch openings with hinged and numbered covers. From those openings, in numerical sequence, nine Provo boys drew, one by one, the names of the lucky applicants.

It took five days to draw the 5,772 names of those who would now be allowed, in order of the draw, to select their homesites. Five of every six registrants went away empty-handed. The others, those who actually filed on homesteads, paid $1.25 an acre. The money went to pay the government’s expenses in opening the reservation, with the balance deposited in a trust fund for the displaced Utes.54

By the end of the homesteading period in 1912, some 450,000 acres had been homesteaded—less than half that made available to the lucky registrants. Another 300,000 acres were sold at auction in 1913, and the remaining land was withdrawn as a temporary mineral reserve.55

What of William H. Smart’s efforts to make this Mormon country? Registrants were not identified by religion, but, given the location of registration sites, the registration was probably about 53 percent Mormon and 47 percent non-Mormon. If so, the same ratio would be true of the names drawn from the box. But actual settlement on the reservation lands was vastly different; most of the towns established there were overwhelmingly Mormon.

Proximity was no doubt one reason. The experience Mormons had gained in colonizing marginal lands through cooperative effort was another. The discomfort of being an outsider from Mormon solidarity could be a third. But Smart’s efforts in identifying the most desirable lands, and the assistance of Wasatch Development Company in placing Mormons there, constituted a most important fourth. Without that knowledge and assistance, would-be homesteaders in that largely inhospitable land faced disillusionment and often failure. A tragic example is the man who sold his Colorado ranch and most of his possessions, drew a “lucky” number, and was so dismayed about what he found in the basin that he shot and killed himself.56

Organizing the Occupation

Two weeks after the reservation opened, with the land-selection process having almost seven weeks yet to run, Smart moved quickly. With his prior

54. Ibid., 245–47.
56. Craig Fuller, “Utah’s Land Rush: Opening the Uintah Indian Reservation,” 18, copy of ms in possession of the author.
knowledge of where settlements were likely, and with his faith that they
would be Mormon settlements, he met with his prayer circle, stake presi-
dency, and high council on September 15, 1905, and presented his plan for
the ecclesiastical organization of the area.

The newly opened reservation lands would be designated the Duchesne
division of Wasatch Stake. Smart’s counselor Joseph R. Murdock (of the
Wasatch Development Company) would oversee it, representing the stake
presidency. Joseph W. Musser would be released as stake clerk and added
to the high council, with the assignment to assist Murdock. Branches of the
church would be established at Whiterocks and Leland in the Uinta Stake.
One of the first two branches on the reservation lands would be at the junc-
tion of the Strawberry and Duchesne rivers, to be named Theodore (for
President Roosevelt) or Richards (for W. A. Richards, U.S. land commis-
sioner who supervised the reservation opening). Silas D. Smith would be
its presiding elder. The other branch would be at Myton at the Duchesne
River bridge, but it would be renamed either Theodore or Richards. David
L. VanWagenen would be the presiding elder.

His plans were approved by the stake presidency and high council, of
course, and six days later by the Presiding Bishopric.57 As evidence of the
First Presidency’s approval as well, Smart was invited to speak at the October
1905 general conference of the church. To solicit an even higher approval
of all that had been and would be done, he appointed Murdock and Musser
“to proceed next week to the reservation and dedicate the country to the
Lord for the settlement of the people and for the preaching of the gospel
to the Indians.”58

Smart’s names didn’t stick, though. The town at the river junctions was
initially named Dora, for Murdock’s daughter; then Theodore; then, in
1915, Duchesne. Myton’s name was never changed, despite Smart’s dis-
gruntlement that it honored a disreputable non-Mormon agent.

Given his hands-on style of management, supervising colonization from
the distance of his Heber office must have been frustrating for Smart.
Clearly, he wanted to be close to the action. When winter closed roads
into the basin and activity slowed to a halt, he busied himself with Wasatch
Stake ecclesiastical duties and personal business affairs, including setting in
motion the building of a stake amusement hall on the northwest corner of
Tabernacle Square.59 But he was getting restless. He announced to his high
council his decision to shed some of his responsibilities to be ready for what-
ever the future might bring, and followed up by resigning the presidency of
the Wasatch Wave in favor of Joseph W. Musser.60

57. Smart, Journals, September 22, 1905.
58. Ibid., November 17, 1905.
59. Ibid., February 17, 1906.
60. Ibid., February 17, 1906.
Still feeling guilt about the failure of his Turkey-Palestine mission seventeen years earlier, he proposed to his wife that he return and do it right. Anna expressed her “willingness to make any sacrifice and do what she can to assist me,” so he took up the matter with Joseph F. Smith. As Smart recorded the response, the president would have none of it.

His answer was [that] I had done a good work in the Wasatch Stake considering the peculiar conditions existing there . . . that I should continue to do so only more with respect to the unsettled part [the reservation] . . . that he knew of no one who would be more qualified to preside over the new division than I who will have been in touch with it. . . . He said that the Turks and Armenians were not taking hold of the gospel. When I said the Jews may be assisted when they gather to Palestine, yes, he said, when the Lord moves them to partake of the gospel—seeming to leave the impression that there is little use to labor for them much until there is more of a disposition on their part to receive the gospel. He wound up by saying that I am where I ought to be and that he believed where the Lord wants me.

With that message from a man he honored as a prophet, and with the assurance that he would preside over the newly opened reservation lands, he wrote that “all desire to go on the Turkish Mission passed away.”

Refocused now, Smart planned his next trip to the basin, this time to study prospective townsites. First he attended the April 1906 general conference of the church, where he spoke to an overflow audience on the grounds east of the old Bureau of Information building. He had fasted and prayed for understanding and a sustaining spirit about the dropping of his friends, apostles John W. Taylor and Matthias Cowley, from the Quorum of the Twelve because of their activities in polygamy. It worked. “Although my heart was full of sympathy and soul sad,” he wrote, “yet I felt to leave all matters in the hands of the authorities and to sustain their decisions.” In that spirit, he left that night for the reservation.

This time, his trip was by rail, and it was not an easy one. He went by the Rio Grande Western from Salt Lake City to Mack, Colorado. There he transferred to the Uinta Railway, a narrow-gauge line recently built over the Book Cliffs to the gilsonite mines around Watson and Dragon in the southeast corner of Uintah County. From there, a sixty-three-mile stagecoach ride that involved ferrying over the Green River brought him to Vernal. Smart was impressed by the railroad over the Book Cliffs, marveling that it “wound around in order to gain the summit until at times we could count the track five times one above the other.” Its grade, reaching 7½ percent in one five-mile stretch, was one of the steepest in the country, and its curves the sharpest, one being sixty-six degrees. No doubt he marveled at the scenery, which

61. Ibid., February 26 and March 21, 1906.
62. Ibid., April 10, 1906.
was described in a Uinta Railway tourist brochure when the line opened in 1904.

Rising steadily up the face of this great range, there is never a moment when the eye of the passenger may not rest with perfect delight and wonderment . . . to the east the great Continental Divide and the Grand Mesa; to the southeast, the precipitous San Juan mountains of Colorado, one hundred and fifty miles away; to the south, the Sierra LaSal in southern Utah, one hundred and sixty-five miles distant . . . from the narrow summit [8,422-foot Baxter Pass] the traveler sees the valley of Evacuation Creek stretching out to the Grand Canyon of White River . . . over the Uintah Reservation and beyond to the Uinta mountains in the northwest, one hundred and fifty miles. . . . It is soul-stirring, poetic, stimulating, satisfying and a never-ending appeal to the artistic sense.

Despite such scenery, the railroad never caught hold as a tourist attraction. Nor was it extended on to Vernal as promised, so it played little part in development of the Uintah Basin. The gilsonite played out, the railroad failed, and it was formally abandoned in 1936.63 No other railroad ever entered the basin.

On this trip, Smart inspected the prospective townsites of Moffet near Fort Duchesne and Independence in the Dry Gulch area; neither town materialized. He looked over the site of the only bridge over the Duchesne River. That became the town of Myton, named for Major H. P. Myton from nearby Fort Duchesne. He looked over the Dry Gulch country, where Smart’s Wasatch Development Company had organized the Dry Gulch Irrigation Company, under the presidency of Reuban S. Collett of the Uintah Stake, to bring water to what would become the town of Roosevelt and the surrounding area. He inspected and was “rather favorably impressed” by a prospective townsite west of the Lake Fork bridge. That would become the town of Arcadia, named by Smart himself for a beautiful (and quite different) area of Greece.64

On Easter Sunday, April 15, he held a sacrament meeting with a handful of Saints living in tents at Theodore (later Duchesne). Meeting in the tent of presiding elder Sylus D. Smith, he spoke of the challenge of colonizing the reservation, declaring it required “economy, perseverance, continuity, & order even if in hut or tent.” Recognizing that in their new homes they would be dealing with homesteaders not of their faith, he emphasized the need for “purity & uprightness of life even in wilds of new home, non-members observing irregularity of life in Saints, must not confound that with

64. Smart, Journals, April 12–14, 1906; John W. Van Cott, Utah Place Names (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press), 12, 268, and 321..
gospel. Those of various faiths to unite on building up [the reservation] even if in competition in religion.”

Later that day, he rode on horseback with Murdock, Musser, and Smith to a proposed townsite he described as “on north side of Duchesne [River] about 12 miles East of Theodore and about 6 miles west of Myton.” His account of the event tells something of the way he and his associates went about their work of Mormon colonization.

It is in a strip of land about one mile wide of lands not allotted to Indians, Indian allotments lying on either side. Homesteaders have relinquished to us Wasatch Development Co, nearly all this strip from point of Blue Bench to Lake Fork Bridge. . . . I suggested that saints be selected to file on land who would do so for a town site Co. under the direction of the Stake Presidency, which Co after proved up upon would distribute the same in justice and equity . . . in small tracts of 10, 20, 40, 60, acres or so who would then lease adjacent Indian lands and cultivate them.65

The four men knelt, each praying “fervently for light upon the question,” and “all felt impressed from reason & sentiment that a town should be built here.” It didn’t happen quite that way. The town built closest to that site was Bridgeland, three miles to the west, established a quarter-century later and only after Smart’s personal intervention.

As he did after every trip to the reservation, Smart reported to the First Presidency. This time, meeting with President Joseph F. Smith and first counselor John R. Winder on April 21, he went further than merely describing his findings: “I suggested that a reorganization of the Uintah Stake I felt would be prudent in as much as the organization is not vital, Bro. S.R. Bennion now getting aged66 and [his counselor] R. S. Collett’s energies being needed on the Reservation.”

If that suggestion seems presumptuous, so does his next one: “I suggested Br. Jos. W. Musser67 as successor to Pres. Bennion [since] if he were

65. Barton, *A History of Duchesne County*, 307. The leasing or sale of Indian allotments started slowly; only a handful had been thus disposed of before 1914. In order to prevent quick sales, the Dawes Act stipulated that title to the allotments be held in trust for twenty-five years. By 1915, that provision was ineffective, and during the next five years, more than 18,000 acres of Indian land had been sold and thousands more leased to white settlers. According to the *Roosevelt Standard*, May 19, 1915, prices ranged from ten to forty-five dollars an acre, including the priceless water rights that went with the land.

66. Jenson, *Biographical Encyclopedia*, 1:478. Bennion was sixty-four years old at this time, only twenty-two years older than Smart himself. He had arrived in Salt Lake Valley as a five-year-old in 1847 and settled in North Jordan. He served a mission in the United States in 1876–77 and another to Great Britain in 1883–85. In 1886 he was called to preside over the tiny settlements in Ashley Valley, and then chosen as first Uintah Stake president in 1887.

67. Fuller, “Land Rush in Zion,” 260. Smart had called Musser to leave his home in Sugarhouse to become Wasatch Stake clerk. Smart now urged him to leave his Heber home to labor in the Uintah Basin, and released him from his clerk’s position to do so. Years later, Musser was excommunicated for polygamy.
there he could and I thought would work in harmony with us who have in
hand the settling of the Reservation.” His first suggestion was accepted; the
Uintah Stake would be reorganized in early June, the president declared.
The second was not, as Smart would soon learn.

He met again with the First Presidency on May 29, and then with apo-
stles Francis M. Lyman, George Albert Smith, and Hyrum M. Smith. To
them, he offered a third suggestion—that the newly opened reservation
lands, then a part of Wasatch Stake, be transferred instead to Uintah Stake,
over which Smart must by then have known he would soon preside. The
apostles approved the change, and then formally informed Smart he would
replace Bennion.

Reforming a Brother

The Uintah Stake conference convened on June 2. Smart’s report was mat-
ter-of-fact: “The former Presidency of the stake and High Council were hon-
orably released, Pres. Bennion having serve for about 20 years and now
being crippled with rheumatism, and I was installed as his successor.68 I
named no counsellors desiring to have a little time to become acquainted
and to consider.” Musser was among the twelve men named to the High
Council, and Smart also made him presiding elder over the parts of the res-
ervation not covered by organized wards or branches. That meant nearly
everywhere, since Ashley Valley, the only site of organized units, had never
been part of the reservation.

Smart’s reason for the delay in naming counselors soon became appar-
ent; he wanted to get his brother involved. On August 4, he went to Logan
to “solicit him to go to the Uintah Stake to live and assist in building up the
country.” For years, Thomas’s indifference toward the church had been a
deep concern to his brother. As a reformed smoker and drinker himself,
William had pleaded with his brother to give up these habits. Thomas had
become even wealthier than William in the sheep business, and was a stal-
wart in the Cache Valley community. He was president of the First National
Bank of Logan, and had built the first pipeline down Logan Canyon to water
the lands he owned on the Logan bench. Later, the Utah State Agricultural
College gymnasium bore his name as the major contributor.

Giving up this life to pioneer in the desolate Uintah Basin could not have
appealed to him. But, on November 5, 1903, while on a sheep-shipping
trip, he had a vision that turned his life around. He was shown the fearsome
result if he continued his current way of life, and the rewards—including
becoming “very wealthy”—if he repented.69 His letter to William telling of
the epiphany concluded with these words: “I must do something and I feel

68. See also Journal History of the Church, June 2, 1906.
69. Smart’s journal of November 9, 1903, contains the letter in full. It is published in this
volume as appendix A.
Uintah Stake Presidency

Officers of the Uintah Stake of Zion

William Henry Smart - President

Harden Bennion - 1st Counselor

Thomas Smart Jr. - 2nd Counselor

Rudger Clawson - L.D.S. Apostle
too weak myself. I will have to have help from you and the Almighty.” So he was prepared to accept his brother’s call to join him as second counselor in the Uintah Stake Presidency. Harden Bennion, an early Vernal rancher, became first counselor.

It didn’t work out, though. Within eight months, Thomas was back in Logan, because, as William Smart put it, “on account of his health and business conditions he cannot now spend much time in Uintah Stake.”70 Likely there were other reasons. One may have been his first bitter memory of Uinta Basin winters; he knew how harsh they could be.

In 1878, as a twenty-four-year-old getting established in the livestock business, he and a fifteen-year-old herder, William P. Ellsworth, drove a herd of cattle to winter on the White River east of Ouray. That was outright trespass on the reservation, but that was the least of their problems. Ellsworth’s job, among others, was to keep water holes open on the White and Green rivers—a desperate task in cold so intense the ice reached a thickness of thirty-three inches. The bitter winter of 1878–79 killed every head of cattle, and Thomas returned to Franklin, once again broke.71

So rugged frontier life as his brother’s counselor held no appeal for him; he no doubt felt he could accomplish more managing his many business affairs in a more hospitable climate. In any event, he was released on July 9 and remained one of Logan’s honored citizens. His conversion stuck, though, and he remained in full church fellowship, as testified by two apostles, John A. Widtsoe and Melvin J. Ballard, at his funeral in 1922.72

The other counselor, Bennion, was released a month after Thomas Smart because, he told President Smith, “his wife’s mental condition was such that she cannot live here.”73 They were replaced by Don B. Colton and Joseph Hardy,74 both of whom would serve to the end of Smart’s Uintah Stake presidency. Colton would, in fact, succeed him as president.

With his conviction that he was entitled to and received divine guidance in such matters, Smart managed a positive spin: “I feel that there was no mistake in the choosing of my former counselors and that I have had this time to acquaint myself with my present ones and with other material. I feel that the Lord is directing matters and in spite of our shortcomings His purposes will be consummated.”75

During the early part of Smart’s organization of his new stake, he was also still presiding over his old one. It took more than two months for the

70. Ibid., April 4, 1907.
72. Charles Rich Smart and Robert Foss Hansen, Thomas Smart, a Son of the Mountains (Salt Lake City: privately printed, 1992), 33, copy in possession of the author.
73. Smart, Journals, August 25, 1907.
74. Journal History of the Church, December 2, 1905.
75. Smart, Journals, August 28, 1907.
General Authorities to get around to releasing him and installing a new presidency of Wasatch Stake. Normally, when a man is released from a church position, he has little if any part in choosing his successor, and none in choosing the new counselors and High Council. That is the prerogative of the new president, with the approval of whatever authority is doing the reorganizing. The Wasatch Stake reorganization was different, in ways that demonstrated the dominance of Smart’s leadership.

Two apostles, Francis M. Lyman, president of the Quorum of the Twelve, and Orson F. Whitney, the quorum’s newest member, were in charge of reorganizing the Wasatch Stake presidency, but Smart played a major role. He recommended his counselor, Joseph R. Murdock, to succeed him, and the apostles agreed. Then Smart met with the apostles and Murdock to choose Murdock’s counselors, James C. Jensen and Edward Clyde. Then he met with Murdock, Jensen, and Clyde to choose the High Council and other stake officers. In his remarks to the conference, Apostle Lyman said he had never seen such a process before, but commended highly what was done.76

Having performed what he apparently felt was his duty to see that the transfer of authority was done right, and with his former stake in hands he himself approved, Smart was ready to leave Wasatch Valley behind. On August 18, he recorded that at “about 11 a.m. we left Heber for Vernal James Holfetz of Midway driving the commisary. Our family road in our white topped spring wagon. The freight wagons from Vernal are still being loaded by Jos. E. D. Tomlinson. I left my home in the hands of the Wasatch Development Co. to be rented or sold.”

For the next sixteen years, as president, in turn, of the Uinta Basin’s first three Mormon stakes, he would live in and labor to settle and develop Utah’s last frontier lands.

76. Ibid., August 11 and 12, 1906.