Mormonism's Last Colonizer

Smart, William B.

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Struggle and Failure in Leota

What’s a man to do when he’s released from twenty-four years of virtually full-time church service? Apostle Richards’s invitation to Smart to rest from his long labors suggests the story of the just-retired man who sat in his rocking chair and, after several weeks, began to rock. William H. Smart wasn’t such a man. A couple of months earlier, on his sixtieth birthday, April 6, he had written that he was “fairly well and full of desire to continue active spiritually and temporally... I have no spirit or thought of retiring.”

So he didn’t. Shortly after his release, he suggested to the new stake president that he be called to preach the church slogan, “Every Member a Tithe Payer,” in every ward and branch. The call quickly came. On horseback, he visited all nine wards and four branches, holding two or three meetings in each place. It took three weeks, from August 14 to September 6, which hardly seems enough, considering the twenty-eight passages of scriptures he reported quoting in his talks “and then expounding them.”1 Brevity was never one of his virtues.

He followed that with a week-long horseback tour of the northern part of Duchesne Stake. Although his authority in that stake was long gone, he did not hesitate to propose to stake president Owen Bennion that the tiny wards of Altonah and Mt. Emmons move together on a townsite Smart selected between the two.2 They never did.

He returned in time to attend the Roosevelt Stake quarterly conference, where he reported on his tithing mission. Then it was off on another tour, this time to Ouray Valley and the country south and east, traveling as far as

1. Smart, Journals, September 12, 1922.
2. Ibid., September 15, 1922.
Bitter Creek and on into Colorado. Again without authority, he met with miners and their families at the Rainbow gilsonite mine and undertook to organize a Sunday school, subject to the approval of the new stake president. En route home, he felt inspired to attend the general conference in Salt Lake City and do temple work there. That meant a 54-mile ride in one day to Ouray, then another day to journey home to explain to Anna that he would be gone again (his assurance that she was “perfectly in accord” seems somewhat questionable), and the next day, at 5 a.m., he was on his way.

The trip turned out badly. He rode in a truck loaded with meat destined for the Salt Lake market. On a steep dugway the driver, Alfred Lubland, backed up to let a team and wagon pass. He misjudged, and the truck rolled over down the hill, apparently fracturing Lubland’s shoulder. Smart was spared broken bones but was badly bruised about the head and neck and much of his body—inhuries that bothered him for months. Travelers also en route to conference took him on to Salt Lake, where, after a hot bath, he “poured out my soul to God for this most marvelous escape from severe injury or death”—and that “the Brethren made my ride gratis.”

Despite his injuries, he attended every conference session. No longer responsible to report conference messages back to his flock, however, he recorded nothing of the proceedings except to note that his invitation to offer an opening prayer was evidence “of my standing of good fellowship with God’s servants.”

For the next three months, while living with his nephew, Leonidas Mecham, Smart served six days a week, holidays excepted, in the Salt Lake Temple, generally attending three sessions a day. Then, early in the new year, he reported for his second session of the Utah legislature.

The Uintah Basin’s Senator

To be close to the Capitol and avoid paying streetcar fare, he moved to a small upstairs sleeping room at 57 North State Street, “very humble in condition & furnishings,” for $3.50 a week. Clearly, he was not one of the “good old boys” partaking of the hospitality of lobbyists and the other emoluments of senatorial office. He took pride in reporting that except for an opening legislative breakfast, he prepared all his meals on a gas burner in that room.

Either because of injuries from his accident, or perhaps because of the controversies he had stirred at the previous session, he kept a low profile in this one. He remained chairman of the agricultural committee, but recorded no committee activity. Except for four days at the time of his daughter’s death, he attended every session and “voted conscientiously on

3. Ibid., September 21-October 2, 1922.
4. Ibid., October 2–4, 1922.
5. Ibid., October 9, 1922.
all [bills], never having swapped votes to obtain favor for any bill.” Among the measures he felt strongly about was one that would dismantle the state’s education system (he opposed it, and it failed), and one authorizing the use of school buildings for church classes and other meetings (he favored it, and it passed). The only speech he records giving seems a curious one for a man in his position—objecting to a special tax on cigarettes because it would make the state a party to their sale. “I did not speak much,” his journal records, “and when I did, but briefly,” which seems strangely uncharacteristic for a man who had spent much of the previous twenty-four years speaking, usually anything but briefly.

Smart’s account of this sixty-day period conveys the image of a lonely man (Anna was in Roosevelt, teaching seminary), cooking his meager meals in his dingy little room, uncomfortable and largely ineffectual in his senatorial role. His journal suggests as much. The day after adjournment, on March 9, he recorded: “having decided to enter Temple again I lost no time but went today. Enjoyed opening meeting very much—a contrast from the Senate I liking it much better.”

Whatever stress he was feeling at this time was heightened by the death of his beautiful nineteen-year-old daughter Anna. On December 9, 1922, her father reported receiving a letter from Anna announcing she had completed her first term at Brigham Young University in a course of study to become a teacher, that her health was good, that she rejoiced in the school’s excellent spirit and influence, and that she loved her parents and felt deep gratitude for their sacrifice in sending her there. Two months later, on February 4, she was dead. “She appeared in normal health,” Smart wrote, “until Monday evening, when she returned from school complaining of headache. She gradually grew worse and administrations and medical attention followed.” After six days, she died of what the doctors called spinal meningitis. Smart’s reaction of faith and acceptance was, for him, typical: “We feel that her school and other things have had her in preparation, that she was ripened for the next probation mission and that our Father willed it so.”

After a resolution of sympathy by the legislature and funeral services in Provo, where BYU classes were suspended and the school band marched and played outside the Fifth Ward chapel, Anna was buried in Salt Lake Cemetery beside her stepmother Mary, but later re-interred beside her father and mother.

For two more months after the legislature’s adjournment, Smart served in the temple. During this time, he united the three unrelated Smart families in Utah into what he called a Smart Surname Family Organization, to join in genealogical research and temple work,6 and sent his youngest son Joseph off to Washington, D.C. for schooling and a federal government job.

6. Ibid., April 17, 21, and 26, 1923.
arranged by Senator Reed Smoot. Finally, on May 1, after a seven-month absence, he arrived home and wrote his usual comment, that he was greeted warmly and “was pleased to find all well.”

All was not well financially, though. A day after his return, a letter from his long-time friend, Church Commissioner of Education John A. Widtsoe, reported that because of the church’s straitened finances, its small seminaries, such as Roosevelt, where Anna as principal and teacher earned the family’s only income, would be closed, but that Anna could probably teach in or around Salt Lake City. The Roosevelt Stake presidency and Smart himself sent letters appealing the closure, and Thomas Laurence, Smart’s second son, applied for the principalship. The appeal succeeded, but not the application. Laurence was turned down, so Anna would remain at Roosevelt at a salary of $1,000 annually, $500 of which would have to be raised locally.

Despite his report in a family council that “our stewardship [is] now well near depleted,” he continued his open-handed generosity. To his son Laurence he released a $4,500 note representing money loaned to him and lost in his abortive sheep business. To his oldest son William he released a couple of notes totaling $331, and to Albert Stephenson, one of the investors in the defunct Duchesne bank, he sent $325 and ten shares of Mutual Creamery Company stock. Stephenson was not among those for whom Smart had signed loans, but he was “financially embarrassed,” and Smart dipped into his own meager resources to assist. Thus, he was able to record, “all those to whom I sold have received help.”

Smart had enjoyed his temple service, but was now feeling the need for something more demanding. He sought it in an unusual way. Following the death of the Myton Ward bishop, Smart approached stake president Byron O. Colton and offered to take the job. In Mormondom, people are “called” to positions; they don’t apply for them. But in that leadership-sparse region, Colton, Smart wrote, “was moved at this and could hardly express himself so much did he approve.” So that recommendation went to headquarters, and Smart confidently waited, fasting and praying at one of his many altars for the right decision, and recommending to Colton the date and program for his installation. It must have been a shock when word came that “the general authority decided it would not be well to call me as former Stake President to serve as bishop under my successor—at least so soon. They also felt it may handicap him.” But if he was hurt, it didn’t show. His only comment was characteristic: “I am in harmony there with.”

So, in a few weeks, by way of a solitary trip on horseback, it was back to Salt Lake City for six more months of temple service. Anna, as usual, remained behind to manage the household and teach in her seminary. Smart’s ego

8. Ibid., May 6, 14, and June 17, 1923.
now suffered a bruising. Summoned to the presiding bishop’s office, he was informed that it had been decided to put him on a church pension of $50 a month.

When I protested he said it could discontinue should my circumstances in future justify it, but the brethren felt that had I not been tied up so much in church work I could have given more time to family genealogy and temple work, and inasmuch as I now desired to do so they wished to relieve me somewhat temporally by this action. When he assured me that it would not meet their pleasure did I not accept I did so. . . . Subsequently I met Pres. [Heber J.] Grant on sidewalk who greeted me warmly. When I tried to thank him and assure him I did not like to seem thus to draw upon my service of the past, he said that anyone who would assist a brother by a free gift of $5000 and more if necessary, in his mission to raise money to preserve the honor of leading brethren, and that committee man finally becoming the president of the church, was deserving of any such little consideration, and that he had never forgotten that act.9

The reference was to Grant’s assignment to raise money to save an Ogden bank in 1898, and Smart’s financial contribution to that effort while he was serving in the Eastern States mission.

**The Search for Financial Security**

Near the end of Smart’s self-assigned six-month temple term, temple president George F. Richards said that he would like to call him as a regular officiator, unless that full-time, unpaid service would make him financially dependent. It would do exactly that, of course, and Smart turned to President Grant for counsel. Would there be any objection, he asked, to his engaging in work that would take him away from the temple? Grant replied that such men as he were free to use their best judgment with perfect freedom to act. Smart’s rather broad interpretation was that “he desires me to do so; therefore that he really would be out of sympathy for me to be tied up in any present missionary Church work as in the temple.”10

With that assurance, he outlined his financial goals. “As the Brethren especially do not wish to see me dependent in my old age thru having become in somewhat humble circumstances during my long Ecclesiastical service, I should like to accumulate $10,000 as insurance against it.” To honor his father’s dying request to have genealogical and temple work done for “redemption of my father’s house,” he wanted another $10,000. And to contribute to the building or maintenance of temples, still another $10,000.

For an ambitious young man to amass $30,000 in the burgeoning sheep business of the late nineteenth century was no problem for Smart; he had

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9. Ibid., October 1, 1923.
10. Ibid., February 1, 1924.
done that and much more. For a sixty-one-year-old man, long-removed from the business arena, to propose doing so in the grinding poverty of his present time and place seems out of touch with reality.

Still, he tried. He first took a train to Brawley, California, to join his son William, who was investigating farming possibilities in the Imperial Valley, a few miles north of the Mexican border. In the stifling heat of early March, at a hundred feet below sea level, they decided that this was no place to live, and that they would return to the Uintah Basin and once more go into the sheep business.  

In the last two weeks of April, he and William studied range possibilities in Castle Valley, around Dragon, and as far east as Grand Junction, but “saw nothing very enticing.” A month later they ventured farther east, crossing the Continental Divide and arranging for summer range on the 14,000-foot Mountain of the Holy Cross, and for spring range near Leadville.

William returned to Utah to buy 1,500 ewes and lambs in Sanpete Valley, while his father went on to Denver to arrange financing. There, fortuitously, he met John Clay, owner of the finance company with whom Smart & Webster Livestock had done business years earlier. Based on the mutual trust they had developed, Clay loaned him $12,000 instead of the requested $10,000, at what Smart considered a favorable interest rate of 7 percent.

So they were in business, and by July 4 the sheep had been purchased and shipped, but to a different range that William had arranged along the Continental Divide, not far from where the Moffatt Tunnel was being bored northwest of Denver. They could not afford to hire herders, so William would handle that job himself. “Thus after having traveled and investigated much,” Smart wrote, having “bot sheep and way provided to pay for & handle them, I hope and pray we may merit success with this deal.”

But no. After less than two months with the sheep, William came out of the mountains and informed his father that he had changed his mind, that he neither wanted to be away from his young family nor bring them into a sheep-camp environment, but wanted to return to try to make a living in Utah. The patient father expressed no dismay, or even a bit of irritation, at this further evidence of his son’s instability, but “told him I can approve of it. Indeed it was along the line of my own thot and desire.”

Failure with the sheep wasn’t Smart’s only trial during this venture. Crossing a street in Longmont, Colorado, he was struck down by a car and his scalp laid open. An hour and a half of stitching, without anaesthetic, closed the wound, and after a day in the hospital he was taken into the home of a German farmer, George Reppler, for a week of recuperation. Here he experienced an epiphany.

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11. Ibid., March 5–11, 1924.
12. Ibid., May 1, 1924.
13. Ibid., May 1, July 17, and September 1, 1924.
“While laid up had some serious reflections on God’s children and the church during which I had an unusual feeling of liberality and tolerence come over me,” he wrote. But his newfound feeling of tolerance did not mask his missionary spirit. “I viewed the great majority of these agricultural good people thru here as all but church members—just blinded by precepts of men or not having had good opportunity to learn the Gospel, & looked upon them as my yet-to-be brethren and sisters.” His fond feelings may have been influenced by the way he was treated financially. Pleading poverty, he was not charged for his week’s lodging. As for the combined hospital and doctor’s bill, his plea of “modest temporal circumstances” reduced it to $19.50.

Despite that generosity, he wrote that “all the time I was east of the Rocky M’t Divide and out of the mt’s I could not but feel a fluttering, uneasy and fearing feeling and the scripture came to me ‘Come out of her Oh my people that ye partake not of her aims and receive not of her plagues,’ and returning westward I again felt better as we crossed the Divide and came this way. This indeed seemed a testimony that my place is in Zion unless called hence.”

Ouray Valley: Back to Pioneering
But where in Zion, and doing what? With other avenues seemingly closed, he concentrated now on the Uintah Basin’s most unpromising, still largely unsettled lands. One such area was the Ouray Valley, a desolate, wedge-shaped region bounded roughly by the Duchesne River on the west and the Green River on the east. Another was the even more desolate land east of the Green River, bisected by the White River and extending south to the Tavaputs Plateau. It was in this region that the government stripped away 7,040 acres from the Ute Indian reservation in 1888 to accommodate the gilsonite miners, land the Utes themselves considered worthless.

Despite that assessment, from the time Smart first beheld it in 1907, the land held a strange attraction for him as a place for pioneering and development. In his remarkable optimism, he had organized the Uintah Realty and Investment Company in 1910, with specific responsibility to develop Ouray Valley and the country between the Green and White rivers. During many inspection trips over the area, he identified the Leota Ranch, established in 1904, as a likely site for the region’s major town (“several times I was filled with emotion even to tears as I contemplated with joy this location,” he wrote), selected a temple site on Leota Hill, studied railroad and road routes, organized an irrigation company, got started on a canal (putting his sons, William and Laurence, to work on it), and chose a dividing line between the occupied basin region to the north

14. Ibid., September 1, 1924.
15. Ibid., October 25, 1912.
and the LDS stake and the new county he felt would eventually be established in this southern section.

To cement his personal commitment to the effort, in 1912 he had bought the relinquished homestead rights for $795 and filed on 320 acres of land near the Leota Ranch, on the northwest edge of Dry Lake, the area that under his direction would be transformed into Pelican Lake. With Anna’s filing on 240 acres two miles south of Dry Lake, that represented a substantial investment in the area’s future. During the remaining eight years of his Duchesne Stake presidency, at least as much thought and time was spent in working toward that future as in administering the settled part of his stake.

All this activity involved a region over which Smart had no ecclesiastical jurisdiction at that time. When the Uintah Stake was divided in 1910, and he became president of the new Duchesne Stake, he felt he would have all he could handle in settling and administering that vast area, including the creation of a new county. The southern lands, he recommended, could best be developed under the Uintah Stake, and that’s where they were assigned. That proved to be a mistake, as the area was largely ignored. But Smart’s conviction that he had been called to pioneer the settlement of the entire Uintah Basin, including these unpromising lands, wouldn’t let him rest, nor would frustration over the Uintah Stake’s lack of both interest in and activity about settlement.

His sense of urgency was heightened by a letter from Frederick Brind of Salt Lake City, who was in London trying to raise British capital to build a railroad into the basin through Ouray, and also by a rumor that “a wealthy English Baron” had purchased much of the Indian land in the basin and was contracting with Ed. F. Harmston to survey a Denver & Rio Grande rail route into the basin from Green River. Smart met with Uintah Stake president Byron Colton, “expressed uneasiness regarding this southern section,” and pleaded for more activity by the stake lest Mormons lose out should a railroad materialize. Colton was unimpressed; apparently he, like most Utahns, no longer shared Smart’s “Mormon fortress” zeal to exclude outsiders. His only response was that Smart could feel free to do anything he wanted to do personally.16

That, of course, didn’t suit Smart’s sense of administrative order, nor his need to be in control of events. He pushed for a better solution—transferring the region to Smart’s Duchesne Stake. Conceding that he lacked a pioneering spirit, Colton agreed, and on June 6, 1913, wrote a formal letter advising Smart that the Uintah Stake presidency and high council had agreed that “your stake is doing pioneer work and it would seem to us to be more in keeping with the original mission and undertaking assigned to that stake for you to direct affairs in that part.” The General Authorities to whom

16. Ibid., May 21, 1913.
the proposal was presented didn’t act on it, though, and for four more years Smart continued his solitary efforts to develop what he called this “new field which is looked upon as the most forbidding of this Basin.”

The first essential for development was, of course, getting water onto the land. That involved digging a canal to take water from the Uinta River, thirty miles upstream. Work started in 1912 under the direction of J. Winter Smith, a civil engineer. By the summer of 1914, water was coming into the western part of the valley, and the *Vernal Express* was able to report, with undisguised optimism, that the first crop of wheat raised under the new canal was of “fine quality and the yield was heavy. . . . The canal is nearly completed and water will be ready for this year’s crops.”  

In 1915, though, Smith left the basin, and the work languished. World War I essentially stopped the project, and on January 2, 1917, Smart recorded that he rode on horseback through the valley and found “few new settlers. Called on them. Found them much discouraged having still no water, canal system being so slow developing. Feeling still the land good I encouraged them to hold on.”

The plight of those people stirred Smart to another attempt to have the southern region transferred to his Duchesne Stake. Colton again agreed, conceding that “these outlying sections had been a burden to him and that he would feel greatly lightened were the boundry so readjusted.” For his part, Smart expressed his relief that “while I feel that added burden and responsibility coming, I also feel happier in assuming again the stewardship that appears to be in line with the spirit of my mission.”

This time the change was approved by the First Presidency, on July 12, 1917. Pressing his luck, Smart met with the presidency four days later with a map of the area and its water courses, “endeavoring to show them that we are now in the majority north of the Duchesne River, that our people are prone to settle near Mountains and unless a vigorous effort be made to secure lands south it would be dominated by non mormon elements.” To forestall that misfortune, he “urged an appropriation so far as necessary to assist in colonizing . . . and that if necessary the church will back our irrigation project there.”

With weighty financial problems of its own, the church never did, but with new validation of his stewardship, Smart lost no time in getting the irrigation project moving again. As president of the Ouray Valley Irrigation Company, he personally signed for a $40,000 bank loan, replaced the company’s manager, George E. Wilkins, with Byron Collett Jr., won approval of his plan to convert the area known as Dry Lake into the Pelican Lake reservoir and pleasure resort, and for $8,000 bought the water rights previously

held by the grandiose but now defunct South Myton Bench irrigation project Smart had tried to help Frank Lott develop a decade earlier.  

In that harsh and arid country, building a canal did not mean the end of water problems. There was seldom enough, and on July 19, 1919, Smart and officers of other basin water companies met with state and federal officials to discuss “the seriousness of insufficient water for irrigation in the natural flow and means to remedy it.” They found no answers.

With little or no payments being made by the few impoverished settlers drawing water from the canal, on December 4, 1921, Deseret Mutual Bank notified the irrigation company that $2,450 was due in interest on the $40,000 note. When no payment was forthcoming, they pointedly reminded Smart that he had personally guaranteed payment of the debt. He couldn’t pay it, of course, and for a decade the matter dragged on. Finally, in 1931, when for Depression-stricken borrowers the alternative was bankruptcy, the bank forgave 70 percent of the debt. The company would pay the remaining 30 percent, and Smart’s obligation was ended.

**Putting Down Roots**

Under severe financial pressure after his release as stake president, and after the abandonment of his and William’s Colorado sheep venture, Smart seems to have accepted the reality that his only option was to grub it out in or around Ouray Valley, like the other homesteaders there. The first essential in that effort was to prove up on the 320 acres of Desert Entry Act land he had filed on in 1912. On July 20, 1925, he submitted proof of eligibility at the U.S. Land Office in Vernal. His patent was approved on April 9, 1926, and the land was his. He made a deal with Ray E. Dillman to do the work needed to prove up on Anna’s 240 acres, for which Dillman could have the best eighty acres at cost.

To be close to his land and also to “lend more help to that section if God so will,” on June 25, 1925, he moved his church membership to the Randlett Ward. That move apparently didn’t put him close enough to his land, and in September he became a member of the tiny Leota Branch, where he recorded that “Pres [John G.] Ekker said he had much desired

20. Ibid., January 23, April 24, and August 5, 1918.
22. Ibid., 36.
24. Van Cott, *Utah Place Names*, 310. Randlett was first settled in 1892, abandoned, and resettled in 1905 when the reservation was opened. It was named for Colonel James Randlett, commanding officer at Fort Duchesne.
the Branch to be strengthened by the Priesthood but he had little thot of such coming in the form of my presence who is a stalwart of spiritual strength.”

Anna remained in Roosevelt, teaching seminary, and Smart rationalized this latest of many lengthy separations.

While things are crude and she by nature and education [is] more adapted to higher developed conditions, and while I am assisting more according to my spirit and nature now in this pioneer work, while her special calling and aid is to teach and thus assist in much needed financial strength as well as to do good in the calling she likes most, I recognize at her age and general condition, she should have her liberty to reside, while this condition exists, where she deems it best.

On September 13, 1925, a week after Smart became a member there, stake president Colton acted on his recommendation to reorganize Leota Branch into Leota Ward, with Lester E. Eklund as bishop. At that time, Colton privately commissioned Smart to represent the stake presidency in the eastern and southeastern part of the stake, acting as a special advisor to the Randlett and Leota wards.

Once More a Missionary

That assistance would have to wait, though. He and Anna attended the October general conference and heard President Heber J. Grant announce a program of short-term missions—three months to a year. Just two days later, Smart recorded that “the spirit of the ‘Short Mission’ and . . . the advisability of my representing the two wards Randlett and Leota that I am called to serve came over me.”

A mission call would, of course, prolong his absence from Anna. It would also interrupt the Ouray Valley colonizing efforts he felt were so important. And it would certainly do nothing to improve his personal finances. The only apparent motivation was what had directed much of his life—he was prompted by the “spirit.”

In any event, he acted immediately. Back in the basin, within five days he got Bishop Eklund to recommend his mission call, resigned as president and director of Roosevelt Realty, arranged for the care of a couple of buggies, a horse, and span of mules, and with $327 in his wallet returned to Salt Lake City. There he spent three more weeks working in the temple, visiting family, and making another of his many financial sacrifices for the sake of his religious convictions. From a matured Beneficial Life insurance policy, he withdrew all but $3,000 and deposited the $1,200 proceeds in a bank

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25. Smart, Journals, September 6, 1925.
26. Ibid., October 14, 1925.
27. Ibid., October 6, 1925.
account to be used exclusively for genealogical research and temple work for his and Anna’s ancestors.28

On November 12, he entered the mission home at 31 North State Street for a week of instruction, then entrained for Atlanta to serve a six-month call to the Southern States Mission. Unable to afford a sleeper or meals in the diner, he sat up for three nights and survived on what food he could pick up at train stations along the way.

With the concurrence of Apostle George F. Richards, the mission president, Charles A. Callis, assigned him to remain in Atlanta to strengthen the branch and its indifferent members. He was told the branch needed “one who can interest and edify as a speaker, and that I could well fill this requirement.” Smart, who had hoped to labor out in the mission field, not at headquarters, felt no joy at the assignment. “While I now feel depressed, unworthy and incapable,” he wrote, “I hope and pray to receive the spirit of the appointment, to come to love it.”29

Despite his plea that he had no desire for executive responsibility, and contrary to the normal lines of authority, he was given supervision over the branch presidency and also responsibility to organize missionary efforts there. But his living arrangements were those of a regular missionary at the time, with he and his young companion splitting the monthly $25 cost of their shared room and bed.

For six weeks he labored at this assignment, but he did find time for a bit of sightseeing. At Grant Park he marveled at the panorama painting of the Battle of Atlanta. He took a streetcar to Stone Mountain east of the city, where he witnessed and disapproved of the work in progress to carve Civil War scenes and images of the South’s leading generals on its granite face. “I felt that it is too bad to continue their part in the war by cutting it for all time in this solid granite wall,” he wrote. But he climbed to the top of the 1,120-foot-high mountain, found the view of the surrounding countryside “a beautiful sight,” and located a secluded spot where “under a tree and with a granite rock before me for a pillar I knelt and prayed.”30

After seven weeks, he got his wish to labor away from headquarters, but not as an ordinary missionary. He was assigned to Columbia, South Carolina, to strengthen various branches, and had the president’s specific charge to “do much speaking, not being too modest therein as the people are hungry therefor.” He was also able to organize and conduct training sessions for the missionaries.

He arrived in Columbia on January 6. There he promptly met the first three converts his youngest son, Joseph, had baptized ten years earlier, after his stake president father had arranged his mission call at the unusual age

28. Ibid., November 12, 1925.
29. Ibid., November 25, 1925.
30. Ibid., December 5, 1925.
of sixteen to get him away from his self-described “mixed prior performance in the Church and in the community.”

Throughout his stay in South Carolina, the father met many members who remembered his son with fondness, including members of the Catawba Indian branch. This was a tribe once about 6,000 strong but reduced by smallpox to about 150. The Catawbas, almost as a body, had joined the Mormon church forty years earlier, and about 90 percent were members at the time of Smart’s visit. Naturally, he preached to them about their Lamanite forefathers, as recorded in the Book of Mormon.

Smart’s career as a proselytizing missionary didn’t last. On March 29, almost thirty-nine years since his appointment to his first successful administrative responsibility, as president of the Brooklyn Conference, he was appointed to an identical one—president of the South Carolina Conference. From then until the end of his mission he traveled throughout the state, visiting Georgetown, Charleston (where, he remembered, Joseph Smith had prophesied the Civil War would begin), Hartsville, Lake City, Society Hill, Patrick, Blythewood, Centerville, Gaffney, Grangeville, Greenville, and Spartanburg, meeting with and training missionaries, encouraging and blessing members, baptizing, organizing, and, of course, following his mission president’s instructions to speak often and at length.

In May 1926, his six-month mission term ended and he hurried home to resume his calling as special advisor to the Randlett and Leota ward bishoprics. Two months later, though, the stake presidency, perhaps uncomfortable with Smart’s tendency to expand his assigned role, decided the position of special advisor didn’t exist in church organizational charts. They released him, and once again, despite his colonizing zeal, he was left with no other calling than as a stake missionary.

“After much thought and prayer,” he sought counsel from Colton on what he should do. Should he now consider his work in the basin was ended and make his home in Salt Lake City to do temple work? For him personally, that would be ideal, he told the president, but added that he still felt he needed to help in the development of the Uintah Basin. Colton’s response was obviously what Smart wanted to hear: “He said . . . my presence here will be appreciated and that he had, with others, much confidence in my ability to assist.”

Life on the Mormon Frontier

With that assurance, talk turned to the land east of the Green River. In that isolated Willow Creek–Hill Creek area, effective church supervision was impossible. On one occasion, for example, as Leota Ward bishop, he tried to bring the scattered members together for a meeting. He rode on

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32. Smart, Journals, August 29, 1926.
horseback to the few ranches along the creeks, inviting what members he found to meet the following Sunday at a certain ranch. When he arrived, he found the men branding calves in the corral between pulls at a well-used jug of whiskey.\textsuperscript{33}

Jed Wardle, president of the tiny Book Cliffs Branch in that area, was being released and his successor had not yet been chosen, Colton told Smart, adding that “as I had always had a clear conception of that section and as important developments are sure to come he felt no other man could handle that situation as I.”

From the beginning of his Uintah Basin ministry, Smart had reflected the same defensive-fortress attitude that had prevailed in the Brigham Young era—keep the non-Mormons out. A half century after Brigham’s death, during which time Mormons and so-called gentiles had learned to live more or less comfortably together, this attitude had softened, if not dissipated. But Smart was of the “old guard,” and his response to Colton was characteristic: the Willow Creek–Hill Creek region must be developed by Mormons before the coming of a railroad would make it more difficult. “While not presuming to recommend,” he wrote, “I felt to say ‘Here am I,’ should my services be required.”\textsuperscript{34}

Ten days later, Colton recommended to Bishop Eklund that Smart be installed as president of the Book Cliff Branch of Leota Ward. Nothing happened. Twenty-five days later, on September 5, Smart took the matter before the Lord, praying at one of his twelve-stone altars that “my future be made clear.” Still nothing. A week after that, at another altar, he reminded the Lord that he had promised President Colton to let him know when he was ready for installment as Book Cliffs Branch president. He wrote Colton the next day, announcing that he was ready.

Finally, on September 22, the answer came in a letter from the stake presidency: “Due to the poor promise of definite development of that section, at least in the immediate future, we do not feel at all clear in placing the responsibility on you. . . . Under the present condition we now feel to relieve you of any definite obligation in this direction.” Smart’s response, showing none of the disappointment he must have felt, was typical of his entire ministry: “Having prayed fervently that you might be guided by the spirit of the Lord in this matter I accept your decision as His will and desire with all my heart that His will be done regarding it.”

Looking back three-quarters of a century later, it is obvious that the stake presidency’s vision of the future was more clear-sighted than Smart’s optimism. No railroad came, and except for a few scattered ranches, modern maps show not a single settlement in the vast area east of the Green River between the White River and Tavaputs Plateau.

\textsuperscript{33} Cooper, \textit{Leota}, 130.
\textsuperscript{34} Smart, Journals, August 29, 1926.
Smart had long urged his sons and sons-in-law to join him in developing Ouray Valley. Only one did—James Rasmussen, husband of his oldest daughter Elizabeth. William, the oldest son, had tried a number of unsuccessful ventures with his father, and expressed no interest in trying another. Thomas Laurence, the second son, needing a secure income for his wife and five children, had landed a job with Taylor Brothers Furniture Store in Provo. Edna’s husband, Charles E. Pearce, was doing well as a businessman on the Wasatch Front and supporting their five children. Joseph, the youngest son, had made it clear that ranching was not for him. Ruth was only fifteen.

But Jim and Elizabeth arrived with their three sons, the oldest being eleven. They and Smart himself moved into an abandoned government building at Randlett on the former Indian reservation. Smart’s $150 loan enabled Jim to settle affairs at the service station he had operated in Salina. The new arrivals quickly found a place in the Neola Ward fabric, Elizabeth as organist and Jim as chorister.

**Selling Out**

Now Smart took a huge step toward eventual disengagement from the Uintah Basin. Throughout his ministry there, he had professed his intention to obtain land only for the purpose of making it available to other Mormons he could attract to the basin, and had urged others to do the same. It is not clear whether his next move was in fulfillment of that ideal, or because he was in critical need of cash. For whatever reason, he proceeded to sell his Ouray Valley Desert Entry Act lands.

The biggest piece, the northern 160 acres, went to Lawrence C. Wall, bishop of Randlett Ward, for $2,000, payable over ten years, but with no payments for the first three years and 6 percent interest due only after the first year. Mark S. Woolley bought eighty acres of the southern half for $2,000 on similar terms. The remaining eighty acres remained unsold for five years. There had been talk of selling Anna’s Desert Entry land as well, but nothing came of that, and it remained as the only tangible legacy he and Anna passed down to their descendants.35

Six months later, he took another step toward disengagement from Ouray Valley. Explaining that he wanted “to lessen my own responsibility, and assist those who need it,” he sold thirty-two shares of Ouray Valley Irrigation Company stock at half the going price, allowing the purchasers seven years to pay, with no interest. The buyers were three homesteaders, Orson Neilson, Oscar Jensen, and Albert Jenkins, described by Smart as “good, worthy but poor men with families. . . . My feelings went out in

35. During the exploration boom caused by high oil prices in 2006, Stonegate Resources, a Grand Junction oil and gas exploration firm, bought drilling rights on Anna’s 240 acres for $25 an acre, with 12.5 percent royalty on any production. As of this writing, no drilling has been done.
sympathy for them and a desire for them to succeed, knowing how difficult it will be for them to pay water assessments, reclaim the land and also provide for their families.”

The fate of one of these men soon sadly illustrated how Ouray Valley settlers struggled to survive on land that could not yet provide a living. Jenkins, a member of the Leota Ward bishopric, was killed while working in the gilsonite mines east of the Green River.

Creating Utah’s Newest Town—Leota

Throughout his Uintah Basin ministry, one of Smart’s major activities was a search for suitable sites for the towns he hoped to see built with Mormon settlers. That was certainly true in Ouray Valley, where, beginning in 1912, he was involved for a decade in considering no fewer than six sites, including his own Desert Entry Act filing at the northwest corner of Dry Lake and Anna’s filing two miles south of the lake. Finally, a site was chosen near the eastern edge of Dry Lake. A two-story brick school house had been built there in 1924, and a post office was established in the home of Frank Roberts in 1926.

But to round out an adequate townsite required more land. Stake president Colton proposed buying 160 acres from a non-Mormon woman, a Mrs. Logan. But how to pay for it in that cash-starved community? Smart suggested bringing a few solid citizens together to counsel to find a way, adding that “as I had done so much in such lines in past I do not desire to repeat it here unless absolutely necessary.” The council was held, without success. Five days later Colton called, appealing for help. With what must have been a sigh of resignation, considering his straitened circumstances, Smart wrote to the Uintah State Bank, authorizing Colton to draw a loan of up to $1,000 from his savings account.

With the site secured for the new town, then there was the matter of naming it. Smart, of course, was appointed to the naming committee. In its first meeting he suggested three names—Byron, the first name of stake president Colton; Smithton, for deceased president Joseph F. Smith and also because Smith was Colton’s middle name; and Irreantum, a word from the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 17:5) meaning “many waters,” because “while this town site now is in the semi-desert I expect to see it and environment well watered.” Colton, in polite response, had suggested William or Smart, and his name was also nominated. The committee voted for the name Byron.

Neither man really wanted the town named for an individual, though. Smart wrote that he “disfavored a personal name so as not to exalt man where we wish a pure city to glorify God.” Colton, after first accepting

36. Smart, Journals, May 16, 1927.
37. Ibid., March 15, 1928.
38. Cooper, Leota, 45–46.
39. Smart, Journals, December 2, 1926.
the honor, changed his mind and asked the committee to choose another name. The name finally submitted in the application for a post office was Ekker, for John Garret Ekker, a Holland-born Mormon convert who had moved into Ouray Valley, probably in 1918, bought part of the Leota Ranch, and built a home, one room of which Smart was renting. But word came from Congressman Don B. Colton that the Ekker name had been rejected. Bishop Ecklund then suggested Leota, the name both of the ranch originally established there and of the already-functioning LDS ward. The committee, probably tired of the matter, promptly agreed.

Notwithstanding his personal and financial contributions to locating and acquiring the townsite, Smart remained ambivalent about settling there. He had acquired a forty-acre parcel nearby, with the intention of building a home and farming the land while Anna taught at the Leota school. He didn’t do it, possibly because at his age the labor involved was daunting, and possibly because of his limited finances. His recorded rationalization was something else: he was concerned that doing so could prove a “stumbling block to the people . . . as they would think that I the ex-stake president and President Colton had connived to build it up for personal aggrandizement.”

Instead, he leased the farm, along with a few dairy cows, to his son-in-law James Rasmussen, and spent many days laboring there, as well as hiring out with Jim to do farm work for others. He lived in a tiny cabin on the farm of one of those employers, George Ashton, sleeping on his canvas cot and cooking his simple meals on a campfire because the cabin had no stove. Despite those primitive conditions, he didn’t neglect to dedicate the place as his temporary home.

A year later, he offered to sell the farm to Rasmussen. Terms were to be arranged later, but there was no delaying the accompanying lecture, telling his son-in-law that “in considering his prospects of success and my faith in same I based the same on four cornerstones: Industry, economy, continuity and keeping at least in fair degree the commandments of the Lord—especially that of temporal salvation, tithing that by it they may sanctify their stewardship.”

Throughout his Uintah Basin ministry, Smart never forgot his basic calling from the First Presidency, to colonize the basin and get home-seekers, preferably Mormons, to settle there. To accomplish that, he extended remarkably easy terms to the buyers of his land. Even that help was often

40. Cooper, Leota, 76.
41. Ibid., 45; Smart, Journals, January 26 and 28, 1926. Ironically, in view of Smart’s and Collett’s agreement that the town should not bear an individual’s name, the Leota ranch had been given the name of a local Indian girl. Van Cott, Utah Place Names, 225.
42. Smart, Journals, March 14, 1928.
43. Ibid., June 11 and July 30, 1929.
not enough, and failures were common. In 1928, for example, he had to reclaim the 240-acre farm adjoining Roosevelt he had sold to Bishop Joseph West and his sons. That cost him several hundred dollars to pay delinquent water assessments, which he uncomplainingly did “to avoid giving them trouble.” It also left him owing $600 to the bank for a loan he took out to help West buy a threshing machine.

Earlier, he had to reclaim from his son Thomas Laurence his second Roosevelt farm, adjoining the first one on the north, when the son decided farming, especially Uintah Basin farming, was not for him. Now, in his continuing efforts to divest his basin holdings, he offered to sell Bishop J. Austin Pack both farms and “all our lands in Ouray Valley to consider with the possibility of disposing of such as they may wish.” The bishop chose only the farm adjoining Roosevelt, and the deal, with fifty-six water shares, was done—the price $6,000, no down payment, seven years to pay, and interest at 6 percent.

“I have always felt that I was moved upon by the spirit of revelation to purchase from a non-member this farm,” Smart wrote, “and that should I dispose of it I wished it to be owned by a member of my family or a good Latter-day Saint. As my sons did not choose it, B’p Pack was my next choice. . . . it however was not without deep sentiment and emotion that our old farm is deeded to other stewardship.”

Three months later, he sold his other Roosevelt farm to LeGrand Mecham, also for $6,000, the first payment due within two years, the others annually for five years, and interest only on any delinquent payments. Even with those liberal terms, “I promised to be lenient in case needed if he does duty,” Smart noted.44

Smart’s inability to get any of his sons securely planted in Uintah Basin soil was not his only paternal disappointment. His oldest son William seemed to fail in everything he tried, and for years would be a worry and financial drain. Smart’s support of his youngest son Joseph’s business venture—a produce and livestock business at Roosevelt—proved even more devastating.

Smart loaned him $1,000 to start, then another $600, then another $1,000 borrowed from the Roosevelt bank, and finally $8,000 borrowed from the Uintah State Bank he had organized years before in Vernal. The company’s first—and as it turned out only—project was to ship a carload of turkeys and chickens to California. It lost money. Smart recorded the events in one of his few journal entries that was not upbeat, philosophic, or faithfully ascriptive of the outcome to the Lord’s will.

Joseph not finding anyone available to unite with him and having lost too much to continue alone—I feeling it unthinkable to borrow further to try to save him . . . he decided to close out. [Enough was salvaged to pay the

44. Ibid., February 3 and 28, 1928, and May 12, 1929.
$8,000 loan, but Smart lost the rest.] It has been a sad and disappointing experience perhaps the severest trial I have yet faced along such lines, and besides the anxiety and disappointment it has placed us in a very cramped financial condition. . . . I should have known better than to have loaned my means and given my approval to his venture at his age [he was twenty-nine] and lack of experience, but it is one of many cases of overconfidence in children and our hopes for their success.45

Joseph escaped to American Fork to wait tables in the restaurant run by his sister Edna’s husband, Charles E. Pearce, while his pregnant wife went to Denver to be with her mother. They never again lived in the basin.

Understandably, when at about this time William wrote pleading for another loan, Smart noted that “of course I had to write refusal explaining to him Joseph’s matter.” It was the first time he could not respond to a call for help, but would not be the last.

Although Smart had trouble getting his sons to settle in the basin, he had better luck with his in-laws. His daughter Elizabeth and her husband, James Rasmussen, along with their three sons, ages ten to fourteen, were busy grubbing out a farm on the forty acres acquired from her father, living in a one-room, dirt-floored and dirt-roofed log cabin, hauling their water from a spring five miles away, fighting grasshoppers, and making adobe bricks for the house they would build when time and money allowed. They stuck it out there until 1935, when they moved to Salt Lake City to get her sons into what Elizabeth felt would be a better environment.46

In February 1928, Smart’s second son Thomas Laurence arrived with his wife’s brother, Morris Buckwalter, announcing that they wanted to get into the sheep business. Of course that got Smart’s interest, and they spent days exploring range possibilities throughout Ouray Valley and across the Green River to the Willow Creek area, perhaps with summer grazing in the Book Cliffs. In the fall they similarly explored western Colorado, but found “few sheep with forest range permits and prices rather high.”

On August 29, 1928, Smart wrote to Utah governor George Dern, soliciting a letter that might help him get grazing permits on the forest reserve, emphasizing that “I wish only fair play.” The governor obliged with a “To Whom It May Concern” letter introducing Senator Smart as “a good friend of mine . . . a citizen of sterling character, who has given much valuable service to the State of Utah.”47 It didn’t help.

45. Ibid., March 29, 1929.
47. George Dern Papers, September 11, 1928, Series 204, Box 20, Utah State Archives, Salt Lake City. Smart’s plea for “fair play” was understandable. Non-residents of the Uintah Basin held key alpine grazing rights. In 1937, 23 percent of the grazing rights went to outside stockmen. The average outside owner received permits to graze twice as many sheep on the public domain as the average basin resident. Brian Q. Cannon “Struggle Against Great Odds: Challenges in Utah’s Marginal Agricultural Areas, 1925–39,” in A
By the following spring, Smart recognized that his age and financial distress made it inadvisable to join his son as a partner, but with his experience and contacts he was able to arrange a $7,000 loan from the Uintah State Bank and counseled in the purchase of 1,280 ewes and rams at $14 a head. The brothers-in-law put the herd on Diamond Mountain, and soon learned why they had been able to purchase grazing permits so cheaply; the area was infested with coyotes.

“Morris and I took turns riding all night,” Laurence later recalled. “We set out intermittent firing pots of gunpowder pellets mixed with sawdust. We hung lanterns in the trees over each small flock of ewes and lambs in an attempt to keep the coyotes away. Our efforts were futile. In at least three cases, a coyote had even carried a lamb into the light of the lantern to devour it.

After six months the sheep were sold—at a loss, of course—and the partnership dissolved, in debt both to Smart and the bank. Laurence struggled all through the Depression years to pay interest on the loan, finally clearing a much-reduced note after launching a successful career with Beneficial Life Insurance Company. Morris never did pay his but hung on in the basin, eventually acquiring a ranch five miles southeast of Myton. He ran sheep there throughout the thirties and forties, then switched to cattle. In 1963 he died there, alone, apparently of a heart attack.

End of the Leota Years

With Leota established as a town, his Ouray Valley property disposed of, and his offer to labor to establish a settlement east of the Green River rejected, Smart apparently felt his work there was ended. Without fanfare, on September 12, 1929, he moved to a rented home in Vernal, reuniting with Anna and sharing the rent with his youngest daughter Ruth, twenty years old and teaching school at $75 a month. The three occupied only a couple of rooms, renting out the other five rooms, including the kitchen, for $25 a month.

Presumably, he left Ouray Valley still confident about his dream that what he had established there would develop into prosperous Mormon communities, forming a stake of the church and with a temple on the hill. It was not to be. Leota Ward, when Smart left, had around 230 members. It never grew much larger, and had no outlying branches. It struggled, with declining membership, through the Depression and the drought years of the thirties. Its church house, built so proudly of locally produced bricks,
burned to the ground on January 15, 1932, days after the last payment for its construction.\(^5\) Declining population closed the school in 1936, and the post office in 1941. By 1948, only 135 members remained. Finally, in 1954, Leota Ward was dissolved.

Today, Leota remains on highway maps, but all that shows where it once was are a highway sign, the ruins of the brick schoolhouse, and the cemetery. The Leota bottoms are a wildlife refuge. The Willow and Hill Creek lands Smart hoped to settle are part of the Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation, with only a few scattered ranches around its perimeter.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Smart, Journals, January 19, 1932.