Mormonism's Last Colonizer

Smart, William B.

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Throughout his long Uintah Basin ministry, William H. Smart gave countless priesthood blessings for healing and/or comfort. His retirement to Salt Lake City did not end that. On the very day he and Anna settled into their one-room apartment, word came of the killing of FBI agent Samuel P. Cowley in a gun battle that also killed the notorious gangster Lester (“Baby Face”) Gillis. Smart hurried to the home of the victim’s mother, his niece Luella Cowley, wife of former apostle Matthias F. Cowley. At her request, he gave her a blessing of comfort. After a funeral attended by church and civic officials in a packed assembly hall, he recorded that “niece Luella bore up under the strain admirably and assured me of the strengthening influence of my blessing.”

But Smart’s own health, never robust, was worsening. Nasal surgery to remove “abnormal growths” left him painfully incapacitated for weeks. Worry about his swollen legs and feet put him on a twenty-four-hour fast of consecrated olive oil and warm water, followed by days of nothing but orange juice and water. Experiencing back pain, he saw a Dr. Kesler, who recommended x-rays ($17) and a month of back adjustment treatments at

1. Smart, Journals, December 2, 1934. On November 27, 1934, FBI Inspector Samuel P. Cowley and Special Agent Herman E. Hollis located Gillis, his wife, and a companion, John Paul Chase, in a car near Barrington, Illinois. A running gun-battle ensued in which both FBI men were mortally wounded, as was Gillis. Chase, wounded and captured, was sentenced to life in prison.

In January 1957, at the time of President Eisenhower’s second inauguration, Cowley’s sister Laura, wife of long-time federal official Edgar B. Brossard, arranged for the author to interview FBI director J. Edgar Hoover in his sumptuous Washington office. After discussing how highly he regarded Mormon FBI agents, Hoover pointed to a photograph of Cowley on the wall and declared, “there is probably the finest agent I have ever known.”
$1 a visit. Moved by Smart’s plea of poverty, Dr. Kesler agreed to perform the adjustments free of charge as his “missionary contribution.”

The x-rays showed that the upper and lower sections of his spine were seriously out of line, causing the doctor to wonder how he could have functioned all these years. For his part, Smart pondered about what in his long life could have caused the misalignment. In a passage reminiscent of the Apostle Paul’s account of his trials, he summarized a life of misadventure.

When [I was] a boy [I] stopped our team by grabbing bits, jerked off feet but hung on until stopped with harvesting machine. Fell from load hay and lit on head cutting same badly on sharp rock. At various times thrown from horses at times so injured as to suffer months or years. Kicked by animals being thrown in such positions as could have strained spine. Several riding with team—mostly mule—accidents when thrown out or dragged off feet & hanging to lines jammed violently against ground on shoulders. Several automobile accidents carrying injuries long—even some yet; e.g. thrown up kinking neck; scalped by run upon and thrown upon shield; twice turned over dugways and pinned under cars—on loaded truck on way here to Conference.

But, he rejoiced, he had escaped broken bones, and by “observing word [of] wisdom, eating wholesome diet the Dr. hopes to benefit me thru his spinal adjustments.” Apparently he did, because there are few subsequent references to a hurting back.

Smart’s move to Salt Lake City apparently brought his financial distress once more to the attention of the First Presidency. A brief letter from President Heber J. Grant, dated December 28, 1934, informed him that “learning that your financial circumstances are anything but satisfactory it is a real pleasure to the presidency of the church to place your name on our pension list for the small amount of $30 each month . . . [in] sincere appreciation of your loyal service to the church.”

In a lengthy letter of reply, Smart expressed “an aversion to pensions except where very necessary,” acknowledged that he had dissipated his finances in his Uintah Basin ministry, but insisted that “we do not feel that the church is in the least obligated to us.” He pleaded for an assignment to some kind of service, “be it ever so humble,” to “ease my conscience, keep my self-respect on higher plane and add very much to my happiness and the chances for success as a candidate for exaltation.”

No such assignment was forthcoming, so Smart created his own. During the remainder of his and Anna’s lives, except for bouts of illness, he labored daily in the temple, and Anna in the genealogical library, on both of their ancestral lines. He soon found that such service could produce not only

2. Smart, Journals, December 6 and 12, 1934, and January 22, 1935.
3. Ibid., December 14, 1934.
4. Ibid., December 31, 1934.
spiritual blessings but much-needed, though modest, financial ones as well; people were willing to pay for endowments performed for their ancestors. On July 2, 1937, after two and a half years of performing two or three sessions a day, he reported that he had done over 1,200 endowments, some unpaid but most at fifty cents apiece.

That helped some. So did the $41 that his son-in-law, James Rasmussen, remitted from the government’s New Deal purchase of cows they jointly owned. And after years of struggle with defaulted contracts, failed land sales and leases, and improvident sons who needed help, always worrying that he couldn’t pay his note to the Uintah State Bank, he finally got some really important good financial news. Bishop J. Austin Pack, who had purchased his original Roosevelt farm but was far behind on his payments, finally secured a $3,000 loan under the government’s New Deal farm program. With that, he paid off the mortgage, and Smart was able at last to pay the worrisome loan he owed the bank for his son Laurence’s and Morris Buckwalter’s failed sheep venture.

There was other real estate activity, too, although not so financially helpful. In February, he sold the Bridgeland farm to Bernard Liddell, not for the $4,750 cash deal they had negotiated earlier, but for $5,000 on a time contract. Then, in March, he leased his second Roosevelt farm to J. W. Anderson on terms conceivable only during the Depression. There would be no crop-sharing; Anderson would take all products. He would have the use of a horse and cow, and Smart would pay for any necessary fencing. Anderson would pay nothing but expenses, and Smart even promised to loan him money for seed and water assessments, if needed.

Smart was relieved. With his note to the bank retired, his Roosevelt farm leased “to a good industrious Latter-day Saint family,” and the Bridgeland farm finally sold, his “soul being filled with thanksgiving,” he left home in the five o’clock darkness of a March morning and climbed Ensign Peak. There, he knelt during the 6:15 a.m. sunrise and “expressed in fervent prayer my feelings and invoked the Lord’s blessings still in our future and that of our family [and] . . . especially upon those who have taken over our realty matters.”

But these were Depression times, and prayers weren’t always answered in hoped-for ways. Anderson found he couldn’t meet even the incredibly easy lease terms Smart had extended. So, two months later, the Roosevelt farm was leased to another, Earnest Pearce, on terms that still provided no income for Smart. As for the Bridgeland farm, a year after the purchase contract was signed, Smart was pleading for the first payment. His journal records no payments up to the time of his death.

Meanwhile, his oldest son William remained a worry. Smart wrote to him in Denver, where he was struggling at his latest failing enterprise, and urged

5. Ibid., February 21, and March 25 and 27, 1935.
William to return to Utah, where proper church and school facilities were available and where he could assist him in finding a “more stable and permanent” occupation. A subsequent letter offered to join him in a “home & business plan through which there may be mutual spiritual, temporal and family union benefit, more spirituality laying foundation for united eternal progress.” William’s reply acknowledged his weaknesses and unworthiness, and accepted the offer.⁶

So it was decided. Smart sent his son $300 to buy a used car, and the family arrived in August. For $25 a month, William rented an eight-room, two-story brick home with basement at 506 East 2100 South. Smart and Anna would occupy this home jointly with William’s family, and Smart would pay the rent. His criteria for buying home furnishings reflect the strong views on morality that his granddaughters remember were part of his persona. “Soft seats & foot rests,” he proclaimed, “often made for soft bodies, minds & morals & cards, unwholesome drink & food, extravagant artificial facial make-up & semi-nude bodies, painted finger nails, etc., not approved by our Master.”⁷

The father–son business partnership that Smart hoped would put William on his feet worked out no better than any of the previous ones. They planned to raise angora rabbits. William wrote for government pamphlets on the matter and attended an angora convention in Washington state—at Smart’s expense, of course. Nothing came of that. They investigated buying into a hide-and-wool plant owned by a Frederick Smart (no relation) on the Jordan River, but backed out after an investigator’s unfavorable report. Finally, William proposed that they invest in a casket company by borrowing money on the property his father owned.⁸

By then, Smart had had enough. Since they had not been able to agree on any business in which to join, he dissolved their partnership. In a stern letter to William dated January 20, 1936, he declared that “having struggled to get out of debt caused by signing with others & having to pay, I do not deem it wise to involve myself now by signing notes to borrow either for self or others.” Moreover, he declared, he could no longer pay their joint rent or William’s other expenses. He and Anna would have to live with their other children, and William “would have to arrange otherwise.”

That stern resolve lasted approximately six weeks. On March 1, he and Anna decided to reduce William’s indebtedness from $2,300 to an even $1,000. Three weeks after that, because William complained that the knit goods he was now trying to sell were not moving, they withdrew $100 of the $300 they had deposited against emergencies. Forty dollars went to enroll William’s oldest son, also named William, in the University of Utah, and sixty

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⁶. Ibid., February 9 and April 1, 1935.
⁷. Ibid., April 18 and August 26, 1935.
dollars to his son’s German-born wife Gretl for living expenses. A month later, William came up with another prospect—to go on the road selling a device someone had invented to prevent glaring from auto headlights.

“He feels sanguine that it is a worthy and saleable article,” Smart wrote, “and that financial success for him looks bright.” But he needed $200 to tide the family over until the money came rolling in. The patient parents provided that with their remaining “emergency” money, with the proviso that they receive “some reasonable royalty on profits.” Apparently there weren’t any, because six weeks later, when Gretl found a modest house in Sugarhouse, Smart paid the rent—$22.50 a month.9

During this time, Smart prayed often at his various altars that his son would find a steady job to support his family. Finally, the prayers were answered. In February 1937, William was hired by the Church Security Department—the original name of what became the church-wide LDS Church Welfare Program.10 His duties, in an area covering several stakes in Salt Lake Valley, were to ascertain those needing employment and to try to find jobs for them. The salary was $100 a month—$50 in cash, the rest in supplies—“with promise of just increase as he learns the business and proves successful.”

Coincidentally, the department’s early home, out of which William worked, was in the building Smart had constructed in 1902 on the corner of 100 North and 300 West to house the Western Knitting Factory and later the Salt Lake Knitting Company, of which Smart was chairman of the executive committee. When the department moved there, on June 1, 1937, Smart joined a group of priesthood volunteers helping to relocate it into the new quarters. “Labored all day assisting in stacking in basement store of canned goods canned by the Dep’t,” he recorded. “It has a voluminous amount of food supplies on hand.”

A month later, he was obviously proud to record that “Harold E. [B.] Lee, General overseer of the Church Security Dep’t and chairman of the General Committee, requested son Wm to formulate to him for use with other regional units a letter giving results of experiences in this Salt Lake unit and offering suggestions.”11

So William seemed, at last, to be on solid ground. So did Smart’s other two sons. Thomas L. had moved his family to Reno, where he was the Nevada general agent for the Beneficial Life Insurance Company. Joseph

9. Ibid., March 1, April 27, May 22, and July 4, 1936.
10. Ibid., February 4, 1937. The Church Welfare Program was formally begun April 15, 1936, based on plans drawn by Harold B. Lee and others, and modeled after the relief program he had instituted in 1932 as president of Pioneer Stake. Lee, later to become an apostle and ultimately president of the church, resigned as Salt Lake City commissioner to become the first managing director of the new program. L. Brent Goates, Harold B. Lee, Prophet and Seer (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 140–54.
11. Smart, Journals, July 5, 1937.
was working out of Denver for the federal government, where, Smart recorded, “2 million dollars had been made available for farm Dep’t for settlers on new homes & his office has responsibility of placing it—he primarily. . . . A grave responsibility, we feel, for our baby boy.”¹² Both, however, were still deeply in debt to their father and making only small, sporadic payments. The oldest daughter Elizabeth, with her husband James Rasmussen and their teenage sons, had given up in Ouray Valley and, also still in debt, moved to Salt Lake City, where James, a competent carpenter, found work despite the Depression.

It must have been a relief to the parents that at least their two youngest surviving daughters, Edna and Ruth, had not needed or asked for financial assistance. Edna, with her husband Charles E. Pearce and their six children, had moved back to Salt Lake City, and they were doing well in business. So were Ruth and her husband Lloyd Pope, her father’s chagrin about their non-temple marriage notwithstanding.

Despite advancing age and faltering health in these final years, Smart seemed driven to activity. Typically, he rose from 4 to 5:30 a.m. for long walks. Ensign Peak was a favorite, where he prayed at the summit monument. City Creek Canyon was another; he built an altar where the road loops to cross the creek, and frequently prayed there. Often after being in the canyon, he walked east to the city cemetery and prayed at the graves of his second wife and daughter and at the monument of Joseph F. Smith. He walked from his home near town to the small “This is the Place” monument at the mouth of Emigration Canyon, prayed there, and visited the zoo. On one June Saturday, at age seventy-five, he climbed Ensign Peak, continued up City Creek Canyon past Rotary Park, and on to the heavy timber and alpine meadows of Black Mountain, where he knelt at a tree stump and prayed. By the time he reached home he had walked nineteen miles, much of it in steep country, and “was truly astonished and grateful that I had stood it so well.”¹³

There was more. Learning that the Ouray Valley Irrigation Company had consolidated with the Colorado Park Irrigation Company—something he had urged during his Ouray years—he decided he needed to go there and “do what I can to help things along.” He bought a $1.55 bus ticket to Duchesne, then caught the mail bus to the farm of Clarence Baum on the Strawberry River, where seven years earlier he had worked as a field hand for his room and board. On this latest visit, he daily chopped wood and hoed in the garden, gave a priesthood blessing to Baum’s dying mother, and spoke at her funeral as well as at the sacrament meeting where Baum was installed as new bishop of the Strawberry Ward.

A frightening event on that trip reminded him of his age. He hiked up a steep ridge where he “was at dizzy height & had I slipped . . . I should have

¹². Ibid., May 22, 1937.
¹³. Ibid., June 19, 1937.
gone to bottom. . . . I could now easily remember that at various times after climbing in past wife and others have reminded me of not being so young active as once and cautioned against going into dangerous places. . . . I now sensed the propriety of this advice and promised myself to heed it."\textsuperscript{14}

Perhaps that realization influenced his reply to an invitation from nearby Fruitland to help them colonize and develop water there—a challenge he once would have leapt to accept. Now, for once, he declined, explaining that “it is now beyond my age and physical capabilities.” Probably for the same reason, he apparently decided he really couldn’t help much in Ouray, and after two weeks in the Strawberry River area he left for home. On the way back, in the Duchesne post office, he found a letter containing eleven dollars in final payment for the land he had sold to the Bridgeland Ward for its church and cemetery. “ Came in opportune time,” he noted, “as I found I lacked a little for bus money home.”\textsuperscript{15}

In their final years in Salt Lake City, Smart and Anna moved seven times, including one summer spent caring for son Thomas L.’s family in Provo while he and his wife traveled on business. Mostly, their quarters were in one- or two-room apartments, but in October 1936, they moved to three downstairs rooms in a home at 143 Second Avenue, a site now occupied by the upscale Garden Towers condominiums. It was only a half-block from the Eighteenth Ward house in Ensign Stake and two and a half blocks northeast of the Temple, Smart pointed out, and they would even have their own bath, with gas for heat and cooking. With a rent of $20 a month and having to pay for heat, it would be more expensive, but Smart felt that Anna deserved it because, although she “had imperfections and made mistakes, her general trend has been successful, according to temperament and ability has done her part as my companion well and uncomplainingly.”

After a winter of ice and snow, they found their home’s hilly location on Second Avenue was difficult for Anna, so once again they went looking. This time they found a downstairs two-room apartment with bath in a home at 121 West 100 North, in the Seventeenth Ward, Salt Lake Stake, about the same distance from the temple as before. Rent was $25 a month, heat and hot water furnished. It would be their last move and their last home.

This builder of altars throughout the Uintah Basin, as well as in Turkey, in his Eastern States Mission area, in the foothills above Provo, and in City Creek Canyon, now decided that he needed one more. On a rocky ledge on the southwest slope of Ensign Peak, “within the environment of our new home and overlooking it as a sentinel,” he repeated what he had done so often before. Twelve stones in a circle represented the Twelve Tribes of Israel. A larger stone resting on the others represented Father Jacob being supported by his sons. On an adjoining flat stone he knelt, dedicated the site as a sacred

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\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., July 9, 1937.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., July 22, 1937.
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place, thanked the Lord for their new home, and reported their plans to dedicate it the next day. On the way home, “its being May day I gathered a boquay of wild flowers and presented them to wife with loving compliments.”

That tender gesture may have come as a surprise. Throughout much of their forty-nine years of marriage, as a single-minded, driven church official and community builder, Smart had often seemed to under-appreciate if not neglect his wife. His absences had been frequent, long, and sometimes seemingly unnecessary. Except for—and perhaps in spite of—his lengthy family councils, lectures, and passion for family organization, Anna managed the burden of homemaking and child-rearing. Designated as secretary in the family organization chart, she edited and copied his letters. In some years her modest salary as a teacher was their only reliable income. All this and more often seemed taken for granted.

In these declining years and dwindling days, that changed. On Christmas Day in 1935, he organized a family reunion specifically to honor Anna,
expressing to her “our confidence and loving devotion won by your years of loving sacrifice for us all. May the pure joy we hope and bespeak for you this day foreshadow that of your future.” The following September, because she had located and furnished it, he honored her with the privilege of dedicating the apartment they occupied at 79 C Street, “which she willingly did and to my entire satisfaction. . . . We closed with kiss of love and union.” The next month, for her sixty-ninth birthday, he arranged a surprise party—the first recorded in all the years of his journals.\(^{16}\)

There were also more personal and perhaps more meaningful expressions of his love, admiration, and gratitude. On New Year’s Eve 1936, he presented Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith’s new book, *The Progress of Man*, to Anna, and wrote of his gratitude “that I have a wife that in faith and intelligence is on that plane. . . . I further stated that I could not express in words adequately my gratitude and blessing in having a wife who in truth could and does unite with me in living—as we do and have done for a number of years—a strictly continent sexual life thus not wasting energy and vitality in waning life.”

For her seventieth birthday, on October 11, 1937, he couldn’t afford even a small material gift, but he gave her something worth more. Hiking to his Ensign Peak altar, he prayed “in satisfying fervancy and invoked future blessings upon her and my ability to appreciate, love and cherish her.” He found a small heart-shaped rock, returned to tell where he had been and why, and presented it to her as her birthday gift. He served her favorite breakfast—buckwheat cakes and maple syrup. In their usual morning devotional, they sang together a song no longer found in the LDS hymnal, “My Light is but a Little One . . . Shine on.” He hung an enlarged photo of Anna beneath a picture of Mary with the child Jesus in her arms, and “told her that in her sphere she is like Mary in purity and maternal love. . . . I rejoice in the that thru prayer & this grouping we are united perfectly therein.”

Smart’s altar prayer was his next to last; his time was fast running out. He spent two more days in the temple, then went to bed with a cold that gradually worsened. On Sunday, October 24, he rallied, and at the end of the day made his last entry in the last of his forty-nine journals covering a half-century of a sometimes turbulent and error-prone but mainly purposeful, energetic, selfless, and fervently devoted life.

We attended S. School, Tabernacle general and ward Sacrament meetings. Am feeling better. Yesterday taking it slowly in middle of day made my usual Sat. trip to Ensign Peak bench and engaged in prayer, and this morning to cemetery usual Sunday Morning visits and offered prayer upon visiting grave of Pres. Smith. During day have read Church section Deseret News, Relief Society Magazine and Gospel Doctrine by Pres. Joseph F. Smith.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., September 6 and October 1, 1936.
Anna then takes up the pen.

The previous page is the last written by my dearly loved husband. He attended the Temple on Monday and Tues. and Wed. On Wed. he was stricken during the afternoon session with pleurisy but finished the session before returning home. He was in great pain and we sent for Dr. Spencer Wright who pronounced it pleurisy and gave him an hypodermic which eased the pain till morning when he recommended that he go to the L.D.S. hospital, fearing pneumonia. He was here for six weeks. The pleurisy became better in about a week but the pleural cavity kept filling with water and having to be drained which was done five times removing about a qt. of water each time. Pus having made its appearance it was thought best to operate and insert a tube at the back to get a more perfect drainage.

This was done on the morning of Dec. 2nd and appeared to be successful, three qts of water & pus being removed. He rested well during the fore part of the night and was sleeping when our son Will left at 10 o'clock but in the early morning I was hastily summoned to the hospital and found that he had passed away about 7 a.m. He had apparently not been conscious of approaching death but appeared to have been in peaceful sleep.

During the time he was in the hospital I went every day spending the entire afternoon & most of the mornings, and our son Will was unfailing in his devotion, coming nearly every evening after his work.

The casket we chose was of dark wood such as we thought he would approve, neither extravagant or cheap, but in keeping with his position and character. We had him brought home on Sat. evening that we might have him to ourselves for the one night. There was a feeling of peace & comfort in the home, family all united.

Pres. [Heber J.] Grant called late in the evening, being on his way to the train to attend a conference in Idaho & dedicate a meeting house. He brought a large package of books which on being opened contained three books for each of the children and four for me, also for each a beautiful letter. He expressed deep regret that he could not be at the funeral but sending Pres. David O. McKay to represent the Presidency. Elder John Widtsoe also sent a letter of sympathy and regret that he had a previous engagement of long standing which prevented his coming. We had hoped to have him speak.

Funeral services were held in a packed Seventeenth Ward chapel. The speakers were McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith representing the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and Don B. Colton, former congressman, Smart’s counselor in the Uintah Stake presidency, and his successor as president. The grave in Salt Lake City Cemetery was dedicated by Byron O. Colton, Smart’s counselor in Roosevelt Stake and his successor as president.

Smart had planned to be buried next to his second wife Mary and their daughter May, but, fortunately as it turned out, her two adult sons wouldn’t have it. Instead, a larger family plot was chosen a few yards to the northwest
from Joseph F. Smith’s monument. Daughter Anna’s body was reburied there and was shortly joined by Anna herself and, later, William and Gretl and daughter Ruth. Two months after the funeral, on February 6, memorial services in Duchesne Stake honored the stake’s first president, with Anna attending as a special guest.

To manage a home, rear seven active and sometimes difficult children, keep an often-absent or preoccupied husband happy and efficient, and be a sometimes bread-winner herself, Anna had to have developed some remarkable skills in arranging schedules and events. Nothing illustrates those skills more than the time and manner of her death. She lived, in apparent fair health, for a year after her husband’s death. As Christmas 1938 approached, she faced a dilemma. She wanted to be present for the Christmas Eve wedding of her grandson Ralph Rasmussen to Blanche Chandler, but she also wanted to spend Christmas with her husband. So she arranged to do both. She attended the wedding, kissed the newlyweds, then went to bed and, at age 70, well before midnight, quietly died. She was buried beside her husband, and there would be no more separations.