Mormonism's Last Colonizer

Smart, William B.

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Mormonism's Last Colonizer: The Life and Times of William H. Smart.

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As he understood it, William H. Smart’s commission from the LDS First Presidency was to see that Utah’s last colonizing, made possible by opening of the Ute Indian Reservation in 1905, would be done primarily by Mormons. A century later, the results can be measured.

When Smart arrived in the rough frontier town of Vernal in 1905 to become president of the church’s Uintah Stake, it consisted of one small ward in Vernal and five tiny outlying branches, all outside the reservation boundary. By 1930, when his Basin ministry was about over, growth of the Uintah Stake had been slow. In that year the stake included only two wards in Vernal and others in Ashley, Naples, Maeser, Jensen, and Tridell, with total membership of 1,397, 15 percent of Uintah County’s 9,035 population.

Smart spent by far his greatest efforts on the former reservation lands, what became essentially Duchesne County. Not a single Mormon unit existed there when he arrived in the basin. By 1930, Duchesne Stake included thirteen wards, with membership of 3,215, and Roosevelt Stake included eleven wards, with 3,614 members. The combined 6,829 LDS membership of these two stakes organized and nurtured by Smart made up 83 percent of Duchesne County’s population of 8,263. Clearly, though the procedure for opening the reservation to land seekers was carefully designed to be open and fair to all, the actual settlement was overwhelmingly Mormon. Smart’s efforts were obviously successful in meeting his commission.

In the seven decades after Smart left the basin, trends changed. Prosperity and growth in Duchesne County hardly measured up to what he envisioned.

2. These percentages are skewed slightly by the fact that three very small Roosevelt Stake wards—Bennett, Randlett, and Leota—were in Uintah County.
Between 1930 and 2000, the county population grew by only 74 percent, to 14,371, compared to statewide growth of 341 percent. There were now five LDS stakes with a total of thirty-four wards in Duchesne County, but the Mormon share of the population had declined to 70 percent. Many of the wards Smart established—Altonah, Boneta, Upalco, Mountain Home, Utahn, Hanna, Strawberry, Leota, Ioka, Bennett, Cedarview—no longer exist. The LDS share of population continues to decline, as it does throughout Utah.

Uintah County, mostly non-Mormon when it was founded, evolved differently after Smart’s departure. The percentage of its LDS population in 2007 had grown to 59.8 percent. Moreover, its general population has grown much faster than Duchesne’s, almost tripling between 1930 and 2000—from 9,035 to 26,224. So today it contains four LDS stakes (Uintah, Ashley, Glines, and Maeser), with thirty-one wards, almost as many as Duchesne.

Uintah and Carbon are the only Utah counties where the LDS share of population is holding more or less steady. With these exceptions, the decline is statewide. Demographers estimate that if present trends continue, by 2030 Mormons will no longer be a majority in Utah. Unless a new economic boom comes to the basin, perhaps fueled by oil or shale oil extraction, it will probably take a bit longer for that to happen in Smart’s beloved Uinta Basin. But, sooner or later, happen it will as an increasingly diversified society is built on the foundation he laid.

So, concerning Smart’s goal of building in the Uinta Basin a dominating Mormon society, the pattern is clear—reasonable success short-term, failure long-term. Depression and drought in the 1930s drove many Mormon settlers from the land, leaving it available for others. But there were more general factors that continue to have inevitable consequences.

Smart’s goal of filling the basin with Mormon settlers was based primarily on agriculture. But making a living that way is tough in country that is too high and cold for many crops; where irrigation is expensive, unreliable, and leaches out soil that is thin and tends to alkalinity anyway; where government restrictions limit summertime grazing of sheep and cattle. Increasingly, the basin’s economy has turned to extractive industry, government employment, and outdoor recreation, all of which attract outsiders.

Another large factor yet to have its full impact is how the nature of society has changed. Americans have become mobile. They move about. Increasingly they move west, especially to parts of the West with space and

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nearby natural beauty. Unlike some other parts of Utah, the Uinta Basin has not yet become much of a destination for new homeseekers, but that will surely come.

So how to evaluate the life of William H. Smart?

He was one of a sizeable group of second-tier Mormon leaders in the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries who devoted a great deal of energy and a substantial part of their lives to church and community building in Mormondom’s peripheral regions. They, Smart included, were stalwart, dedicated, effective stake presidents. But in some ways Smart was unique.

Many served twenty or even thirty years in their callings, almost always as president of one stake. Smart served twenty-two years, but as president of four different stakes.

Other colonizing stake presidents were involved with the development of a headquarters town and a few outlying settlements, in a limited area. Smart was the chief development force in four large towns and scores of smaller settlements scattered over a remote and harsh area roughly ninety by thirty miles.

Other presidents generally presided over members who had been formally called as colonizing missionaries. By Smart’s time colonizing of that sort was essentially over. Except for Smart himself, no one was “called” by church leadership to the Uinta Basin. He had to recruit his own associates in leadership and spent much time personally recruiting settlers.

The ministries of other presidents involved sacrifice, though some prospered not despite but because of their leadership positions. Smart carried his sacrifice to extremes. His descent from wealth to poverty was due in part to his own mistakes, in part because of events beyond his control, but in large part because of his conviction, frequently expressed, that his wealth was a gift of God and should not be withheld from benefiting his church and its leaders, his community, his Mormon brothers and sisters.

Probably no other stake president played such a part as Smart in the long, sad history of displacing Native Americans. His journals say little about the process of opening the Ute reservation but a great deal about his efforts to settle Mormons on the lands the Utes lost. He wrote one entry about the incompetence of reservation supervision and his conviction that Mormons could do it better, and he made a brief, abortive effort to put his brother in the job. Otherwise, his fifty voluminous journals are silent about his Indian neighbors. There is no clue about whether he regarded them, as Mormons were urged to do, as Israelite brothers or, as others of his generation did, as ignorant, lazy savages.

Smart’s life mirrored the painful, divisive closing period of mainstream Mormon polygamy. He believed deeply in the principle. As a young missionary he wrote a scathing journal entry criticizing what he felt was the
church’s weak and dishonest defense of it. Nearing midlife, twelve years after the Manifesto supposedly ended the practice, he took a second wife and then lived in polygamy for twenty years, until her death.

Several prominent polygamous men left or were evicted from the church during this period, laying foundation for the apostate fundamentalist sects that have carried on the practice to the present day. Not so with Smart. From the time he shouldered full-time church service to his dying day, through the ministries of Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith, and Heber J. Grant, his faith in and allegiance to the president and other leaders of the LDS church never wavered, neither did his faith in the doctrine and principles of the church itself. During his early years of addiction, torment, failure and guilt, during his latter years of poverty and disappointment, and in the trials and crises of all the years between, his journals reflect no weakening of his basic beliefs or resolve to serve.

Did he, in the end, feel he had failed in his life mission? There is no evidence he did, or should have. If the mission was to build a lastingly homogeneous Mormon society, yes, that failed. If it was to build up the church and its members, for which community building was only a means to an end, there was no failure.

As for Smart himself, sad as his final years seem, there is no whining in his journal about it. And there’s something triumphant about his climbing in his last days to his secret altar, offering his next-to-last prayer there, finding a small heart-shaped rock to give his wife as her only birthday present, and then singing with her the songs of Zion.