

A Ministry of Blessing: Nicholas Groesbeck Smith

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NICHOLAS GROESBECK SMITH WAS BORN INTO MORMON ARISTOCRACY. He was a grandson of Apostle George A. Smith, a son of Apostle John Henry Smith, and a half-brother of George Albert Smith, who became eighth president of the church. If he had been the oldest son of John Henry Smith's first wife, rather than the oldest son of the second wife—who knows? Perhaps he would have become president of the church. He was a missionary in Holland, a bishop for ten years, three times a mission president, a counselor in the Salt Lake temple presidency, acting Church Patriarch, and one of the first five Assistants to the Twelve.

In this essay, however, I do not want to explore his ecclesiastical callings, real and possible, as much as I want to pay tribute to a man who was never administratively a mover and shaker, and who has consequently largely been forgotten. Instead, he was a servant, a minister, a healer, a consoler, and a bridge-builder. He welcomed and accepted every church calling that came to him, regardless of personal inconvenience. He loved people and cherished opportunities to serve. He was sincerely modest about the visibility, power, and administrative prerogatives of his positions, but he relished the opportunity for one-to-one ministration.

I encountered Nicholas when Mary Ellen Stoddard Smith, whose family histories I have edited for a decade, finished her own maternal and paternal lines and moved on to prepare a family history of her dead husband's ancestors. Her husband, Stan, was the third of the four sons of Nicholas G. and his wife, Florence Gay Smith. Among the materials she gave me was a photocopy of a journal which Nicholas began as a missionary in Holland and continued, with occasional gaps that sometimes lasted for years, right up until his death in 1945. Nicholas G.'s youngest son, Nicholas G. Smith, Jr., became interested in the project. He had arranged for photocopies of the diary to be made in the 1960s after his mother's death, but neither he nor his two older brothers had read them

recently because Nicholas's handwriting was fatiguing to decipher. He welcomed the prospect of a typescript edition.¹

I want to talk about Nicholas's life chronologically, pausing periodically over incidents that deserve more detail or that highlight an aspect of his character or personality. Two of those incidents are a conflict with his first employer after his return from South Africa where he was mission president for seven and a half years, the second was the excommunication of his kinsman, Richard R. Lyman.

BACKGROUND AND FIRST MISSION

Nicholas was born 20 June 1881, the second child of John Henry Smith and Josephine Groesbeck Smith. Josephine was John's second wife. By his first wife, Sarah Farr Smith, John fathered eight sons, then three daughters. The oldest surviving son, George Albert Smith, became president of the church. The seventh, Winslow Farr Smith, was born eighteen months before Nicholas, and the two were inseparable friends, not only as boys but as men. Nicholas was the oldest son and second child in Josephine's family of eight.

The Edmunds-Tucker Bill, which was passed the year after his birth, impacted his life. His father was called to preside over the European Mission when Nicholas was three. Josephine and Nicholas visited him for a few months, arriving on 2 November 1883 and departing eight months later on 26 July 1884. In an unfinished, undated manuscript, Nicholas half-jokingly reports, "Under his [Father's] presidency I filled my first mission."

After returning to the United States, Josephine and her steadily increasing brood spent almost a decade on the Underground, avoiding arrest for polygamy. They were able to return safely to Salt Lake City in 1897, where her eighth child and fifth daughter, Josephine, was born in 1898.² Nick was then sixteen. He graduated from West High School in 1902 with decent, though not spectacular grades; however, he shone in

1. Lynne Kanavel Whitesides and Martha Dickey Esplin did much of the inputting for most of the volumes; then during the course of proofreading the diaries, I discovered gaps and missing pages. At that point the whereabouts of all but five of the originals were unknown. Nick remembered that his older brother, John Henry Smith, had loaned the diaries to the Historical Department archives of the LDS church in 1983 where they were microfilmed, then returned to the family. This decision to microfilm turned out to be a fortunate one. I completed the transcription of those in the historical department; there are no restrictions on who may see them. The final transcription is about 1,500 pages long. I appreciate the permission of Mary Ellen and Nick to draw on the diaries for this essay; but they, of course, are not responsible for my conclusions and interpretations.

2. The other children were Sarah Ann (1878), Nicholas (1881), Joseph Harmon, 1885, Lucy, 1887, Elizabeth, 1890, Glenn, 1893, and Arzella, 1895.

athletics, captaining a football team that went undefeated for three straight years.³ For the rest of his life he avidly followed local ward and collegiate sports. It was an enormous pleasure to him that his three older sons were also athletically gifted.

His patriarchal blessing urged him to cultivate cheerfulness, and his good nature was certainly a trait that drew people to him. Tall, handsome, and sunny of disposition, he was praised in tributes after his death as "a marvelous maker of friends." His entire life was characterized by a disposition eager to be happy and easily contented. By demanding little for himself, he had much to give others. Service was a reflex, and the church was blessed that so much of his adult life was spent in significant church callings.

Nicholas began keeping his first diary on the day he was set apart for his mission to Holland just ten days after his twenty-first birthday in 1902. For over half of the time, he was president of the Amsterdam Conference, in frequent and close communication with Heber J. Grant, president of the European Mission. Simultaneously, Winslow was serving in Germany; the two wrote regularly and visited two or three times. They made something of a "grand tour" after their missions, traveling through Germany, Italy, and France. By special permission, Win met Nicholas when he reached Holland, and they were able to spend several days together. When Winslow left, Nicholas wrote in his diary (1 August 1902): "Winslow the dear old boy, took train for Germany, leaving me in one of the bluiest spells I ever had but as I had given myself up to the spreading of Gods work I bore it as best I could and resolved to be cheerful."

This is a significant statement because his diary is determinedly cheerful, even when he has to force the jocularity a little during those first few days and weeks of adjustment. Groningen, his first assignment, was a shabby agricultural town. Although the church's few members were struggling financially, they willingly shared what they had with the missionaries. Nicholas was appalled at the dirt, the insects, and the coarseness in which he had to live, but his journal account is deliberately humorous. He writes things like this:

In the evening with Bro Platt visited some investigators. Bro. Platt talked while I looked wise.

3. According to his son, Gerald Gay Smith, Nicholas manifested unusual racial tolerance for the times in his relationship with "Ab" Howells, an African American teammate. When an Ogden restaurant refused to let Howells eat with the rest of the team in the dining room, Nick said, "Then we'll all eat in the kitchen with him." When the rest of the team celebrated their victories by getting drunk, Nick and Ab, both of them teetotalers, "would see that they got home." Gerald told these stories during the response period of the Sunstone presentation in which I read an earlier version of this essay in August 1997. Audiotape SL97 #254 in my possession.

Arose and attended meeting. Most of the saints bore their testimony and a good spirit prevailed. ... had a dinner on a table without a cloth. The Menu consisted of the following: String beans, Potatoes, Sausage and Grease which they dole out by the cup full.

At the evening meeting I spoke for about a minute Bro. Joseph C. Platt translating. ...

In the evening we called on one of the Saints and feasted on burnt chocolate till I thought I would die.

In the morning received two letters ... which drove away a horrible case of the blues.

Had a horrible bed last night almost bent double sleeping over a hill right in the middle of it ...

Fleas almost finished Pres. Platt and they did finish me. ... A fine supper of bread, butter, cheese, and water.

Had a dinner of Potatoes and meat and a few hairs for desert. Came to the conclusion that if Christ got the same kind of food among the poor that we did, I didn't blame him for fasting forty days.

... dinner ... consisted of the old favorites, bread, butter, cheese, and water.⁴

Interestingly, we get a much different picture of this emotionally arduous time at the beginning of his mission from an undated manuscript about his missionary experiences that Nicholas began writing, probably in the early 1940s. He is more candid, both about conditions, about his insecurity, culture shock, and the spiritual resolution to his situation. He wrote:

... District President Joseph C. Platt felt that I should start at once to learn the business but I wanted to study the language & be able to talk first. My Arguments were of no avail and so he took me to the head of one of those streets and said "take every door. Don't miss one or you might miss an Israelite. I must finish some work on another street—goodbye."

I looked down that street & wondered how I would dare go to a door and ha[n]d out a tract without being able to talk a word of Dutch. Finally I knocked at the 1st door and the little woman who answered tried to talk to me but I put the tract in her hands and tried to talk with my hands but she couldn't understand. I created quite a sensation and finally ran onto some

4. I suppose it's natural for a young man with a healthy appetite to pay close attention to his food, especially when he can't speak the language and when comparisons with home are close to the surface. Nicholas was not just being picky. He was personally fastidious and had a mild and healthy sensuous streak in him. For the rest of his life, he describes his pleasure in "stripping off," as he called it, to mow the lawn in his swimming trunks or "work up a good sweat" doing yardwork, then soaking in a hot bath or shower. He always recorded the quality of the meals he was given and the bed he slept in while he was a visiting general authority. If either was bad, he didn't complain, but if they were good—and they usually were—he recorded that fact appreciatively.

one who could talk English and was that a relief. I talked so long to them that Pres Platt becoming concerned came along. ...

My first night in Groningen will never be forgotten. ... Partitions had been pulled out of the downstairs to make a little hall that would seat about 40 people. The upstairs was reached by a stairway that was almost perpendicular, from about the 4th step from the bottom you could stand and look right into the room with you[r] head a few inches above the floor above. There were three rooms above two chairs & a couple of boxes to sit on. A table. No floor coverings at all just plain boards, not even a bed, and I didn't realize what that ment until it was time to retire, when to my amazement Pres Platt pulled out of a bare cupboard some blankets[,] place[d] one on the floor and we laid down it and pulled the other one over us. ... They were full of fleas. Exhausted and sore the next morning when we arose I said to Pres Platt *I'm going home*. He rebuked me for such a statement saying that my father was one of the leaders of the Church & would give his life for the Church. What? he ask[ed] would your father do if he was here? I replied—He would have gone home last night. He would never have slept in that bed. ...

The second evening he took me out to an investigator and began preaching the Gospel advising me to sit and listen[,] try to catch on to some words. What an evening! Unable to understand a word I sat there until 10 Oclock and then said Its time to go home. He replied that I should be patient because the people want to give us something to eat ... About 10:30 food was brought in. A thin slice of Rogge Brood, black as ink and looked like it had been cut off the end of a brick. One look was enough to destroy any appetite I may have had & so I said I can't eat that. "Yes you must[,] " replied Pres Platt or these folks won't ever join the Church if we don't accept their Hospitality. Then I said they never will because I won't eat that. Finally I did however and it wasn't bad. Within a few weeks, I liked that better than any bread I ever ate. Home & to bed on a second hand iron affair without spring[s] I had bought that day and we did get some sleep. I had a strange dream and related it as follows to Pres Platt the next morning. I left Holland crossed England had the trip all the way across the Atlantic & the train ride across America to home. As I walked up from Third West & South Temple streets to home I saw my sweetheart and she turned her back on me. Then I met Mother and she said "Son, what will your Father say" and I said [""]Mother if you won't tell him I will go right back.[""] I got on the train and had the trip right back to Groningen. Then I woke up and was I glad to be in Holland. President Platt took hold of my hand and said "I have been worried about you. Now you have had the Missionary dream I know everything will be O.K." and so it was for a day until Sunday Morning when Pres Platt says it is time to go down to Sunday School. Depressed and unable to talk to anyone in Dutch, I said I am not going down. Again he tried to persuade but I was obdurate, so he went down and I sat and pondered for a few minutes only to be distracted by the sound of music from below. In our lovely Deseret the Saints were singing. I couldn't understand any words but the tune cut me to the quick and down on my knees I went and poured out my heart to my heavenly Father pleading with him to help me to be a man. All through the

opening exercises of that Sunday School I was on my knees. Then Pres Platt peaked [sic] over the top step for the stairs were almost like a ladder and saw my tear stained face and ask[ed] "how are you feeling?" I replied better and he said "you look better come on." So I went with him and surely the Lord had transformed me and I began to appreciate the food and everything about those lovely people and their country (pp. 10-12).

None of this is in his diary—not the first experience tracting, not the efforts of his companion to help him get acclimated, not the purchase of the bedstead, and most conspicuously not his discouragement, vivid dream, refusal to attend church, heartbroken prayer, and transformation. The diary makes it clear that there was no overnight transformation. Nicholas's revulsion at dirty food and his comments on the coarseness and monotony of their living situation lasted for weeks, not just a weekend. He continued to struggle with the language for months.

Was he remembering his missionary experience with a storyteller's art—shaping it to contrast his youthful insecurity and culture shock with the seasoned missionary that the Lord could make out of willing timber? In other words, did he remember his "before" experiences as worse so that his "after" experiences would be better? Perhaps. And in an effort at the time to deal with his depression by denial, did he fail to record his dream and prayer in his journal because he would then have had to acknowledge just how severely local conditions were impacting him? I think a little of both dynamics is at work. I do not consider it a possibility that Nicholas later fabricated his spiritual experiences. Such an act is too inconsistent with the rest of his personality. And certainly his love for the Dutch people was genuine. For the rest of his life, he maintained contact with them, recording with joy when he met them again—including some who immigrated to South Africa. He performed marriages for their children, spoke often in the Dutch ward in Salt Lake City, helped them find housing and jobs when they immigrated to the United States, patronized those who established businesses in Salt Lake City (especially furniture-maker Cornelius Zappy), and enjoyed attending the semi-annual reunions and socials held in conjunction with general conference.

Nicholas was released from his mission in 1905 and returned to Utah where he worked first as a salesman for ZCMI's grocery department, then as manager of Mountain States Telegraph and Telephone Company in Davis County. He married Florence Gay of Ogden on 20 December 1906 in the Salt Lake temple. They lived in the Seventeenth Ward, where his father had been bishop, and where Nicholas served as a counselor in the YMMIA, as Sunday school teacher, and as a member of the Third Quorum of Seventies. The three elder of their four sons were born in

rapid succession: Gerald Gay Smith, John Henry Smith, and Stanford Groesbeck Smith.

SOUTH AFRICAN MISSION

On 1 September 1913 Nicholas was called by church president Joseph F. Smith to preside over the South African Mission, and they sailed two weeks later. Nicholas was thirty-two, Florence twenty-six, and their sons were four, two, and one. Without mission counselors, Nicholas struggled against exclusionary immigration policies that capricious officials used at will to deny admittance to LDS missionaries. There were never more than twenty missionaries in the country at any one time. The missionaries were surprisingly mature and self-motivated. Nicholas trusted them; and almost invariably they responded by working hard, dealing uncomplainingly with homesickness, serving the members self-sacrificingly, and absorbing the uncertainty of when, if ever, they would be released as wartime shipping and immigration regulations made the possibility of new missionaries shrink.⁵

As World War I overtook Europe, the number of missionaries dwindled until finally Nicholas was left alone, a mission president with no missionaries over whom to preside. Singlehandedly, he cheered and encouraged struggling branches and patiently waited out almost a year's bureaucratic hindrances until his successor, James Wylie Sessions, arrived in March 1921. During Nicholas's seven and a half years as president, he received permission to purchase the mission home, "Cumorah," that still served as mission headquarters when three of his four sons, in

5. There were only two exceptions to this record of exemplary service. One elder, in the mission home while waiting for the boat to go home, had been smoking, as Nicholas could tell by the "aroma." Nicholas did not confront him but patiently waited, sure that he would voluntarily confess. Within a day or so, the elder confessed, asked forgiveness, which Nicholas freely granted, and then two days later began flirting with Florence. When Nicholas caught him trying to pinch Florence—the word has been written over and could be either "arm" or "rear"—he sent him home with "a release commending him for his good works but not an Honorable release." Another elder confessed to him that he had married a young widow in his most recent field of labor. Since this widow, a girl in her early twenties, and her mother had been frequent visitors at the mission home, Nicholas was shocked and grieved. Again he did not overreact but thought carefully about his options, then told the missionary that "if he left on the next boat for England I would pay his fare. If he decided to stay here I would give him a dishonorable release & he would have to get home as best he could" (27 May 1918). The missionary decided to leave on the next boat, but the surprises were not over. After the missionary left, Nicholas went to the missionary's field of labor and discovered that there was no record of a marriage being performed, so he confronted the mother and daughter and learned, to his dismay, that the marriage had occurred in Capetown only a day or two before the missionary sailed for England. The elder had, in fact, been involved in a lengthy affair.

turn, served in South Africa. He also added a large meeting room, hand-digging the foundations with the help of members and missionaries.⁶

Speaking years later at a Primary conference on the importance of being an example, Nicholas told a story that does not appear in his diary:

I remember out in the center of Africa I was ... on my way up to Salisbury in Rhodesia. I sat at a table with six men; some of them were very profane and all of them used liquor as well as having their tea and coffee at the table. As we sat there I refused to take tea. I was on my way to visit a family of Saints in Rhodesia, and after I left Victoria Falls and got up to the Saints' home in the other part of that Province, I was amazed to find that they had received a letter from a man, a neighbor of theirs who said: "I sat at a table with your Mormon leader and he didn't drink tea." Think what the result of my example would have been had I taken a cup of tea or a cup of coffee, and he had transmitted that information to some of the people he happened to know were members of the Church. Even while I was in the center of Africa, yet my example would have been carried on to the Saints, and then, of course, to all the membership of the Mission, that the Mission President, when hid away where he felt he was secretive, would take tea and coffee and thus show himself to be a hypocrite.⁷

Nicholas and Florence worked especially hard to build strong and cordial relations among members who were a small minority and not highly regarded. They kept a complete open-house at the mission home. Members from all over the country would show up with a couple of hours' notice or no notice at all to stay for a day or a week, sometimes with numerous children. The piano and tennis courts were consistent draws for young people, and Nicholas records having visitors for tea every day, sometimes as many as twenty. Florence who, all agree, loved people and was instinctively hospitable, had to manage this constantly fluctuating household and feed an ever-changing number of people with the intermittent help of one European servant girl and some native servants, as well as caring for three preschoolers. She has not left her feelings about this period, but Nicholas's tone in his diary is consistently genial, hospitable, and generous, nor does he record any instances of Florence's feeling differently. After Nicholas's death, a South African woman

6. Proselyting was confined to the English and Boer, or Dutch, where Nicholas's language skills found an entry for him. He worked determinedly and with a certain amount of skill to make friends for the church in Capetown, to maintain good relations with officials and prominent people in other towns, and to establish cordial professional relationships with the other clergy. When a lurid anti-Mormon movie came to town, Nicholas and the elders passed out hundreds of pamphlets with a smile and a cordial invitation to come to meetings and see what real Mormons were like.

7. "Be an Example," undated address to general Primary conference, typescript, Nicholas G. Smith Collection, LDS church Historical Department, MSS 8816, reel 4.

who had immigrated to the United States, wrote Florence a breathless and perhaps unwittingly candid letter of condolence:

None of us ever knew such utter gentleness and kindness before you came to South Africa or since you went away. We thought all the people from Zion would be just as wonderful to us as Smiths. Our first blow was when [the next mission president] came to Africa and said we could not go in and out of Cumorah without an invitation, that that was their home. Of course they were right, but we had come to look on Cumorah as our beautiful home too. Smiths had made us feel that way.⁸

Nicholas helped South African Saints find jobs, looked for runaway youngsters, counseled wayward sons, gave blessings of healing and comfort, named and blessed children, presided at funerals (Mormons were not allowed to officiate at marriages then), and cheerfully participated in holiday outings, long walks, and birthday parties, even though he had no taste for camping or hiking.

Although telegraphic service was available during the war, Nicholas was really on his own in dealing with problems. When a drunken member was arrested for the attempted rape of his eight-year-old stepdaughter, Nicholas comforted the distraught wife even after she made her daughter change her story, refused to pay the offending member's bail, and convened a court to disfellowship him for drunkenness and, after his conviction, to excommunicate him. Despite abuse heaped on him by the distracted wife, Nicholas continued to visit the family and—this touches me—bought and installed a padlock on the inside of the little girl's bedroom door so that she could feel safe at night.

Florence almost died of typhoid fever, a virulent illness that left her dark hair completely white, and suffered the first of several miscarriages. And when the world epidemic of Spanish influenza struck South Africa in the fall of 1918, thousands died—12,000 whites and 500,000 natives in South Africa alone. Nicholas was able to obtain a little aspirin from a local doctor and tried to care for the missionaries, all of whom survived such kill-or-cure treatments as sweat baths and enemas. In later years Nicholas recalled this time as a fulfillment of his missionary blessing that he would see "the arm of the Lord made bare" as he emerged from his "hiding place to vex the nations."

Speaking at general conference after his return, Nicholas recalled "that terrible October of 1918":

8. Gladys C ____ J ____ (initials on envelope but full name not signed to letter), Beverly Hills, to Florence G. Smith, 8 Nov. 1945, Nicholas G. Smith Collection, MSS 8816, reel 4.

The first day they began to die in dozens. At the end of the first week five thousand people had died in [Cape Town] alone. The coffins were all used up, the trains stopped running, the street cars stopped running, the stores closed, even the drug stores and we could not get medicine. They were laying people in trenches, hauled out to the cemeteries and laid in trenches and covered without any caskets.

I saw children dragging their parents' caskets along the street. I saw men with bodies thrown over their shoulders, carrying them off to lay them away. ... People were dying everywhere, and at the end of the second week 10,000 people died in the city alone. The saints came down with that dread disease—fifty-seven Latter-day Saints in the city of Cape Town had the disease, half of them spitting blood, and that was the sign of the end. I remember that it invaded the mission house—five of the missionaries were down. ... I remember Aaron U. Merrill of Cache Valley and I were the only two left upon our feet. ... I said to Elder Merrill, "Are you prepared to go with me through the city blessing the people?" He said, "I will go as far as I can." And so we set out.

It did not do any good to knock on the door and wait for an answer, for in some homes they found eight people dead, lying around on the floor, some having crawled along the passageway to get to the kitchen to get a drink to quench their thirst, and they died there. The first door we came to was that of a Mormon girl who had married a non-Mormon. He had promised her she could go to church and do anything she liked if she would only marry him. After they were married he told her she could not go to those accursed Mormons any more. When we opened the door and walked into their house, he was standing at the foot of the bed, looking out of glazed eyes. When he seemed to recognize us, he said, "Get out of here!" I walked up and took hold of his arm, and saw his wife upon the bed, too weak to speak. Just then a neighbor came in and said, "It is all right gentlemen. The doctor left here an hour ago, and he says they will be dead in another hour. You may go on your way." Go on our way and leave a Latter-day Saint to lie there and die alone? We anointed her with oil and sealed the anointing, and lo and behold the Lord raised her up; but the man He took. [His diary records that they fetched another Mormon sister to nurse the couple, which may have had something to do with the woman's survival.]

And we went from door to door that day, and of the fifty-seven who had been smitten with that disease, every Latter-day Saint was healed. Not one died!⁹

MISSION PRESIDENT TWICE MORE, GENERAL AUTHORITY

In April 1921, after months of waiting for knots of red tape to untangle, Nicholas welcomed his replacement and the family returned to Utah.

9. Conference Report, 1923; reprinted in *Cumora's Southern Messenger*, Mar. 1961.

The month after Nicholas's return, Rudger Clawson, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve, ordained him a high priest. He served as alternate high councilor in the Salt Lake Stake and as president of the newly formed Salt Lake Mission. He also served on the YMMIA general board. He searched several weeks for a job, then was hired by the church to work at the Bureau of Information on Temple Square where the South Visitors Center now stands. His salary was a meager \$150 a month. He did not complain about the salary—or about anything else either—but it was obvious that Benjamin Goddard, director of the Bureau of Information, took a strong dislike to Nicholas and tried to make his life miserable. An older man with scholarly ambitions, and a British convert, he had been associated with the bureau since 1902. Perhaps he was jealous of Nicholas's easy friendliness and instant rapport with tour groups. After about ten weeks, he pulled Nicholas off tours and assigned him to "sell beads" and curios at the little gift shop inside the bureau. Two weeks later, Nicholas wrote, "Brother Goddard called me in and told me that on account of the shortage of one man he would have to ask me to do Janitors work for a few weeks. I got on my overalls and went with the man. During the day I worked one hour 30 minutes and when I asked what else there was to do they said just sit down and rest" (diary, 8 Sept. 1921).

Nicholas certainly did not feel that janitorial work was beneath him nor did he complain that his strengths with people were not being used appropriately.¹⁰ Instead, he recorded with telling precision exactly how long he worked each day—never more than three hours and sometimes less than one—and summarized after a few days: "I am beginning to think there is a nigger in the woodpile [an unfortunate but common phrase at the time meaning "something suspicious"] about needing my service as Janitor so bad" (diary, 10 Sept. 1921). About three weeks after he had begun this schedule, he recorded: "Brother Goddard in his frenzy to give me some kind of dirty work sent us down in the basement of the Bureau to clean and straighten up. It had not been cleaned for three years and needed some work done on it. One of the Janitors said he must have it in for me otherwise he wouldn't have set us to work there." It is the only note of bitterness in his record. His half-brother, George Albert Smith, counseled him to "to be happy & patient and my work would work out alright" (diary, 3 Oct. 1921). Only two days later, Nicholas recorded, perhaps with a pardonable note of triumph:

Scrubbed the floor of the Bureau of Information and was dusting down

10. Gerald Gay Smith recalled feeling the injustice that his father, after giving nearly eight years of his life to church service as a mission president, was now doing janitorial service. But when he protested to Nicholas, his father replied, "It's honest work. It doesn't bother me, and it shouldn't bother you."

the stairway when Bro. Goddard came in. He informed me that my Janitorial Duties ended and for me to work in the Bureau selling things. He further informed me that he was not feeling well as his heart was going over 100 a minute. In afternoon, Winslow [president of the Northwestern States Mission] advised me that brother Goddard had been questioned rather stiffly in the Mission Presidents meeting. I take it that was the cause of his quickened pulse and my release from Janitorial Duties (diary, 5 Oct. 1921).

The next day Nicholas was put in charge of ushers for general conference and recorded with joy that President Heber J. Grant, speaking in priesthood meeting, had praised John Henry Smith's "wonderful work and then said George Albert Smith, Winslow Farr Smith[,] Nicholas G. Smith his sons are worthy sons of a worthy sire" (diary, 6 Oct. 1921). Nicholas also received a special blessing of "comfort and consolation" from his kinsman-patriarch Hyrum G. Smith, and he and Florence received their second anointings. Obviously, these spiritual compensations greatly consoled him for his less than satisfactory employment situation.

Unfortunately, there is no diary for 1922, the next year; but during that year he was appointed manager of Deseret National Bank Building, which leased office space to other businesses. Although he took a pay cut from \$150 to \$100, he accepted the offer and raises followed until he was getting \$250 a month, which allowed him to send his sons to college and on missions. Even more importantly, on 22 October 1922 he was ordained bishop of Seventeenth Ward by Apostle James E. Talmage. His and Florence's last child and fourth son, Nicholas Groesbeck Smith, Jr., was born in 1927.

While still serving as a bishop, Nicholas was ordained a patriarch in June 1932 and served as Acting Presiding Patriarch, a position he held until March 1935 when Heber J. Grant called him to preside over the California Mission. After his release in August 1937, he was called as first counselor in the Salt Lake temple to Stephen L. Chipman, a widower. Florence served as matron. In August 1940 Nicholas was called to preside over the Northwestern States Mission and was released after sixteen months to become one of the first five assistants to the Quorum of the Twelve with Marion G. Romney, Thomas E. McKay, Clifford E. Young, and Alma Sonne. They were sustained on 6 April 1941, and Nicholas was still serving in this position when he died of a coronary occlusion on 27 October 1945.

Nicholas apparently stopped keeping a diary in 1922 and the next complete volume dates from 1942, twenty years later, when he was called as a general authority. As a result, we have no first-hand account of his presidency of the California and Northwestern missions or his activities

in the temple presidency or as acting Church Patriarch.¹¹ Nicholas enjoyed and respected his association with the other general authorities, but if he had an ambitious bone in his body, I have been unable to discover it in hundreds of pages of his personal writings. Instead, the message that strikes even the most casual reader is his eagerness to serve. In some ways, even as a young missionary, he was fatherly; and even as a general authority, as his son Nick puts it, "he never got over being a bishop." He mediated family disputes, counseled estranged couples, looked for run-aways, found jobs for the unemployed, visited the sick, welcomed the homeless to his own roof, ran errands for widows, spoke movingly at funerals, wrote cheery letters to servicemen, and interviewed returning missionaries, recording with unfailing relish when each of them answered, in response to his obviously leading question, that his or her mission was "the best in the Church." Anyone who had ever met Nicholas had a claim on his friendship for the rest of his life, and he was as willing to do a favor for the friend of a friend as he was for a member of his own family. When he explains the chain of acquaintance in, say, performing a marriage, it is sometimes three or four people long. His missionaries, members from his various mission fields, and their friends, were treated like members of his extended family. Never well-off, or even financially comfortable, he was generous of spirit, and Florence had the same gift of hospitality.

But perhaps most importantly, he blessed people directly by the laying on of hands and the utterance of inspired speech. When he had a free evening, he enjoyed visiting the city's hospitals, freely blessing any who desired it. Visiting the sick, said one of the tributes after his death, was his "hobby." He blessed blind children, people with cancer, and people suffering from kidney failure. Most frequently he did not record whether someone recovered or not; but in the cases where death followed a blessing, he did not seem perturbed or even comment on it. In addition to

11. Since Nicholas so faithfully commenced a new diary with the beginning of each new church calling, it is possible that other volumes or partial diaries may have been lost, even though he admits in 1942 that the press of earning a living made him neglect his journal for several years. His diary as a general authority is extremely circumspect. He faithfully records the complete name and office of each individual he ordained or set apart, obviously seeing his diary as a supplement to the official church records; but he never describes the content of the quorum meetings he attended. The most commentary on such meetings he ever makes is to say something like, "Many important decisions were made." Such restraint had been established as a policy on 5 October 1904 when President Joseph F. Smith had warned that the contents of the apostles' diaries, were they to "fall into the hands of the enemy[,] might bring trouble upon the church." The Quorum of the Twelve unanimously agreed not to record "in their journals that which took place in the Council meetings." Rudger Clawson, Diary, 5 Oct. 1904, in Stan Larson, ed., *A Ministry of Meetings: The Apostolic Diaries of Rudger Clawson* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1993), xiii.

blessing those who were ill, he blessed departing missionaries, departing servicemen and servicewomen, those experiencing marital difficulties, those who suffered bereavement, the discouraged and depressed.

He had a particularly endearing willingness to bless women—dozens of them—struggling with infertility; and he records with pleasure being shown the children who were born after these blessings. One of these women was his own daughter-in-law, Mary Ellen, who, after five years of marriage and exhausting the infertility treatments available in California, flew to Utah with Stan for conference. She remembers the blessing as being a “very direct blessing, not only of motherhood, but that I would be a good mother. I never felt a moment’s doubt.” Still, she was startled to realize that the “airsickness” she felt on the plane returning home was really morning sickness. The first of their seven children was born exactly nine months later.

Nicholas also ministered to people by his genial attentiveness. A constant stream of visitors flooded his office. Often they were petitioners for whom he could do nothing but listen—but he did that, courteously, attentively, warmly. One woman from Seventeenth Ward sometimes spent two or three hours at a time complaining about disagreements she had with her grown children. Nicholas always heard her out. And when he could, he helped. His was a ministry of blessing.

A surviving diary of a few months during 1929 when he was a bishop shows him making up to a hundred visits to ward members a month. He kept a running total, and I find it endearing that about a third of the time his math was off and he ended up actually undercounting the number of visits he made. Unfortunately, there is no journal for most of his years as bishop, but perhaps the flavor comes across in two items he kept in his preparation book. One was a somewhat overwritten but sincere tribute paid by a young woman in his ward when he was released in 1935. In it she tells of one family’s experience, almost certainly her own:

Once late at night, the man had put away his work, and was preparing to go to bed, when a loud knock came at the door. Without delay, it was opened. A young girl was there, wild-eyed and frightened. Her father was sick—oh, very sick. Death was so near. Could he come — it was late — but if only he would come. The lateness of the hour didn’t matter. Here was a person who needed him, and he was ready to be of service. The man followed the girl to the room of her sick father. The father heard his footsteps in the outer hall. Just the sound of his footsteps brought him comfort. Soon he felt cool hands upon his head — and then a prayer, so humble, and yet so sincere. The man was pleading with God to spare his neighbor’s life. The thankfulness of the wife and the three daughters of the sick man could not be spoken. The hours of their vigilance had left them spent and weary. In their anguish, they had called upon that man, who had such a way with him with God. When he left the room, he left behind a calm peace and the shining light of hope. The father would live!

The second was an ironic poem by L. A. Cowles clipped from the newspaper:

CALL THE BISHOP

If your baby's got the colic,
Call the bishop;
If your son's gone for a frolic,
Call the bishop;
If your daughter shows some spunk
Or blows in your latest punk
And your spirits all have sunk,
Call the Bishop.

If your baby's got a tooth,
Call the Bishop;
If your husband tells the truth,
Call the Bishop;
If your neighbor, for a joke
Gives your rib a gentle poke;
Don't respond with lightning stroke,
But call the Bishop.

If your tenant won't remain,
Call the Bishop
If your landlord raises cain,
Call the Bishop
If your flivver will not crank,
Or your youngster needs a spank,
Or your sweetheart won't be frank,
Call the Bishop.

When good fortune comes your way,
Forget the Bishop;
He looks up yonder for his pay,
Forget the Bishop;
When you've plenty and to spare,
And there's joy everywhere,
And you've not a single care,
Forget the Bishop.

I have the feeling that Nicholas enjoyed both messages—Doris Dalby's hero-worshipping praise and this wryly realistic poem about bishop-ing—with equal zest.

Nicholas and Florence were a happy couple; and he was always impatient to reach home after a trip. He frequently came home for lunch in the middle of the day just to visit with Florence, and "visiting at home"

was so pronounced a pleasure that he recorded it dozens of times as an evening activity in his diary. Nicholas had also grown up in a happy and contented home. By the time he stopped counting the number of temple weddings he had performed, it had reached 1,700 (diary, 15 Oct. 1945). When he counseled couples—and many came to him—he did so from a strong experiential foundation of contentment, love, and mutual respect. Not surprisingly, he considered divorce a disaster to be avoided at almost any cost. A typical satisfied journal entry would be: “[So-and-so] and his Wife came in to see about getting a divorce. I talked them out of it and got them into each others arms” (9 Apr. 1943). Or “[So-and-so] & his wife ... who have been on a verge of a divorce came in to discuss the matter with me and I finally got them into each others arms & sent them away happy and determined to make a go of it” (1 Nov. 1943). It is true that his counsel frequently placed an extra burden on women to be accommodating, not surprising given the times and the fact that women tended to seek marital advice oftener than men. For example, one woman “came in with her baby in her arms asking if she should get a divorce from her husband. She had 5 children. I told her of course not, but to be a good wife & win her husband from drinking & smoking by being a real Latter Day Saint” (diary, 17 Mar. 1944). At the same time Nicholas had zero tolerance for unrepented sexual infidelity. When former mission president “Ben Bowring came in about a former Missionary who is running out on his wife,” Nicholas recorded succinctly, “I advised divorce” (diary, 2 June 1944).

Nicholas was utterly loyal to the church in the same way that he was loyal to his family and for the same reason. He had a tribal feeling about both. During his entire life, he had close relatives among the general authorities, and the larger network of in-laws, cousins, and relatives by marriage formed an expanded community in which church, civic, and familial obligations overlapped. His patriarchal blessing told him, “In your veins flow the blood of the Prophets and the Patriarchs of this dispensation.” Without arrogance, Nicholas was proud of this family distinction. In at least two patriarchal blessings given to relatives, he used the same phrase; and it is clear from the context that this “chosenness” imposed special obligations and responsibilities, not necessarily special privileges. He had no particular political ambitions, despite his father’s ardent espousal of the Republican party and his mighty efforts to establish it among Utahns in the years before statehood. When asked to run for the Salt Lake City school board, Nicholas did, as nearly as I can tell, with the same sense of *noblesse oblige* that he brought to his church callings—and won.

An example of how seriously he took ecclesiastical obligations is revealed in 1944 when his son John was serving as a bishop in Arlington,

Virginia. Nicholas was startled to receive a letter saying that John had a good business opportunity in Utah and was thinking of asking the stake president for a release. It was unusual for Nicholas to give his children or anyone else direct orders, but he immediately fired off a telegram (an expense he would not have incurred lightly) telling John not to talk to the stake president, then followed it up with an urgent letter:

I just sent a telegram reminding you of the fact that we can not resign from a Church job. ... Whatever you do I want you to be successful at, and you take a big chance when you tell the Lord what you're going to do.

Nothing would please us better than to have our children close to us but we will never tell the Priesthood what to do.

Let President [Edward] Brossard know that I am opposed to your asking for a release. When, however, he is inspired to release you that is another question, but we stay on the job as long as the Lord wants us there.

... Remember what President Grant said, No Bishop has the right to run away from his job. ... I am anxiously waiting word from you as to what you have done.¹²

This level of commitment is extraordinary, even in the pre-expansion church before the 1950s. It is also touching to realize that, at a time when American manhood was defined by entrepreneurship, capitalism, acquisition, and power, Nicholas G. Smith instead enthroned valor, honor, and loyalty as the watchwords of his life. As nearly as I can tell, he remained faithful to these values from boyhood on.

Near the end of his life came another episode that revealed Nicholas's character: the excommunication of Richard R. Lyman for adultery. Like Nicholas himself, Richard was a third-generation general authority. His grandfather, Amasa M. Lyman, was a counselor in Joseph Smith's First Presidency and an apostle until 1867 when he was dropped from the quorum for spiritualist activities and sympathies with the Godbeites. He was excommunicated in 1870 and not rebaptized before his death. His son, Francis M. Lyman, was ordained an apostle in 1880, was British Mission president while Nicholas was in Holland, and served as president of the Quorum of the Twelve for thirteen years before his death in 1916. Richard R. Lyman, ordained an apostle in 1918, was excommunicated on 12 November 1943 and rebaptized almost ten years later in October 1954, but his priesthood blessings were not restored even though he lived another nine years. He was a descendant of John Smith, brother of Joseph Smith, Sr., and hence a second cousin to Nicholas G. Smith.

12. Nicholas G. Smith to John Henry Smith, 27 July 1944, Nicholas G. Smith Collection, reel 4.

Nicholas's diary mentions no private interactions with Richard R. Lyman, who was about ten years his senior until 1943, when Richard, Nicholas wrote, "talked with me about talking sex to young people before marrying them" (diary, 13 Oct. 1943). Presumably Lyman was encouraging greater sexual explicitness—which is ironic considering the bombshell that was about to explode about Richard's private life.

Less than a month later, J. Reuben Clark, who had heard that Lyman was having an affair, assigned Harold B. Lee and Joseph Fielding Smith to follow him at night. They confirmed that he was meeting a woman. At Clark's request, Salt Lake City's police chief conducted a "smashed-door raid," discovering Lyman, age seventy-two, in bed with Anna Jacobsen Hegsted, age seventy-one. Lyman was excommunicated the next day for "'a violation of the Christian law of chastity.'" Michael Quinn has argued, persuasively in my opinion, that Lyman "definitely entered polygamy," even though it was "a totally unauthorized relationship," begun seven years after he became an apostle. In 1907 Lyman "restored this woman's church privileges which had been taken away following her post-1904 polygamous marriage to another man"; and the couple then "exchanged vows in a mutual covenant to establish a relationship known only to themselves."¹³

It is clear from Nicholas's response that the idea of plural marriage never crossed his mind and that he instead viewed his cousin unqualifiedly as a simple adulterer. On Saturday, 13 November 1943, the day the notice of excommunication was published and the morning of the day Nicholas left for stake conference in Malad, Idaho, he wrote in his journal:

I was informed by Joseph Anderson to not present the name of Richard R. Lyman to Malad Stake Conference as one of the General Authorities as he had been excommunicated from the Church for Adultry [sic]. I am heart sick. I cannot understand. I went home and Florence & I had our cry out. Lee Palmer [a member of the church Welfare Committee] came and took me to Malad and he was broken hearted. We met with the High Council & Bishops and I plead with them to be charitable in their feelings toward one who has sinned but remember the Church has done right for the same rule that governs the lay man also governs the Apostle. All must be clean in thought and action for they can have no place otherwise in this Church. The Malad people were stunned as he was their favorite apostle. ...

The next day he added that the stake president had been "unable to sleep because of the news & Lee Palmer was also much disturbed in his rest. ...

13. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 183, 497, 670; and D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 373.

[At the morning session] a sad yet good spirit prevailed. I mentioned the trouble about Bro Lyman and ask[ed] for charity toward him."

It touches me that Nicholas, instead of huddling with his colleagues to exchange rumors and news about this dereliction of duty, sought comfort for his sorrow with Florence, an act that affirmed the bond of their own mutual love and commitment, and that his public stance was to plead for charity without in any way trying to minimize the grievousness of Lyman's fault.

While Nicholas was attending this stake conference, his son Stan called from California about the "rumor." With sadness, Nicholas wrote back on Tuesday, 16 November 1943:

Unfortunately, it was not a rumor. It was the truth. You will remember in my talk in Conference I said, "Your sins will find you out. You cannot hide them." How true that is whether it be an apostle or any lay member. The special meeting was held in the temple Friday October 12th when action was taken. The severity of the penalty of course suggests to you that the case must have been a flagrant one. Yes, it is has been running through a number of years, it didn't just flare up like a flash in a pan. I think there is something mentally wrong—for several times he has been pressing down on me to buy some sexual books he has and to talk that stuff to every couple I marry. Which I refused to do.

Pres. Grant has been in tears for days and says it is the most terrible thing that has befallen him in his life.

I had a very hard time to carry on with my conference in Malad as it kind of stunned me and all the people there were broken hearted. The man was their favorite apostle & they couldn't understand.

Uncle George [Albert Smith] has of course been under tremendous pressure and is far from a well man. Some folks censure him for signing the notice, but of course that was his job. ...

The gas man said to me, "The war has not affected the people like this has. Every one who comes in here can talk of nothing else."

Every job carries with it a responsibility. I hope and pray that me and mine will always realize our responsibility and so live that our lives may be as an open book.¹⁴

I was a little surprised that Nicholas, who did not hesitate to visit murderers in jail, did not call on his excommunicated kinsman; but there is no record that he did. Four days later he tells of helping his brother, Apostle George Albert Smith, "with some matters and heard a story from two men about Richard R. Lyman that made my blood run cold" (diary, 17 Nov. 1943). I think there is no question that for Nicholas unauthorized

14. Nicholas G. Smith to Stanford G. Smith, 16 Nov. 1943; holograph in possession of Mary Ellen Stoddard Smith.

polygamy would be as heinous a sin as adultery. Perhaps he simply could not bring himself to visit the disgraced former apostle who had broken the Mormon and the Smith code of responsible manhood.¹⁵

After Nicholas's unexpected death in October 1945, Richard Lyman wrote Florence an eloquent letter of condolence, which perhaps can serve as a summary and conclusion to the life of this man who was both likable and lovable: "Sister Lyman and I would have come to you immediately if so doing had seemed wise but under existing circumstances we thought it best to go upon our knees side by side, as we did, and appeal to our Heavenly Father—to bless you and give you strength and comfort in this trying hour." He praised Nicholas as an "affectionate faithful and ever devoted saint and friend, ... a manly glorious character. Like President George Albert he made friends everywhere. Those who knew him best loved him most. He was truly a great man, a marvelous Latter-day Saint."¹⁶ It is a judgement there is no need to revise.

15. Eighteen months later Nicholas saw Richard Lyman and his half-sister at a family gathering and says he "thanked [Richard] for his letter," although he does not mention the contents (6 Feb. 1945).

16. Richard R. Lyman, Letter to Florence G. Smith, 27 October 1945, Nicholas G. Smith Collection, reel 4.