In the forties, Smith became much associated with J. Frank Norris and the Baptist Bible Fellowship adherents around the world. From June 23, 1950, until the day of his death, January 12, 1974, Noel Smith was the voice of the Tribune.

A native of the volunteer state

Noel Smith was born in Greenvale, Tennessee, in Wilson County on August 7, 1900. When he was a child, his parents moved to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and he lived there until he was 17. His education was limited to what he received in grades one through eight.

His salvation and call to preach

Smith, at the age of 15, was converted to Christ in the First Presbyterian Church in Murfreesboro. When he was a teenager, his mother died, and Smith left home. He became a railway express agent for 15 years. In 1918, Smith was living in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and attended a Billy Sunday meeting. At that meeting, Smith gave his life to Christ and promised he would preach the gospel as long as he lived. After this decision, he began to study his Bible and to read widely. Soon he was holding meetings all over the South. In the fall of 1930, Smith resigned his job with the railroad and was ordained into the gospel ministry by the Second Baptist Church of Clarksville, Tennessee.

Marriage and family

In his travels he met the woman who was to become his wife. He had baptized Mattie Linda Stuart in one of his meetings in May of 1932 in Dixon, Tennessee. He married her the following winter, and during those Depression days the two existed on what small offerings were given to the itinerant preacher. In 1935, Charles Stuart Smith was born, their only child. During the years Charles was growing up, the family served the Lord in a number of small churches in Tennessee and Kentucky.

Association with J. Frank Norris

In the forties, Smith became much opposed to the climate of the Southern Baptist Convention which was led by Louis B. Newton. SBC president Newton's views of communism being the child of Christendom caused Smith to "check out" of the Convention. As a result of Smith's stand against Newton, J. Frank Norris invited him to come to Fort Worth and speak to his Fellowship meeting. After speaking several times in Fort Worth, Norris offered Smith a teaching position at the Bible Baptist Seminary. Smith subsequently served as the editor of Norris' paper, The Funda-mental-ist, from 1947 until 1950.

The founding of the Baptist Bible Fellowship International

In 1950 Smith took issue with Norris' dictatorial, unethical leadership, and out of the controversy the Baptist Bible Fellowship was born. Smith played an important role in the founding of the new fellowship. He had laid his career on the line, and the first entity created as a result of the new fellowship was the Baptist Bible Tribune. The Smiths moved to Springfield in 1950, and the paper was already 11 issues old when the new Baptist Bible College started. In the days and months following, Norris engaged in a sort of war of words and Smith countered with articles in the Tribune. Norris called him, derisively, "Know-All Smith." Smith returned the argument with wonderfully satiric articles depicting himself as a lowly hillbilly fighting for truth in his own unlearned way. After a couple of years, however, the warfare pretty much ceased, and references to Norris were made no more. Smith was a man who had better things to do than engage in religious controversy.

The death of his wife, Mattie

In 1953 Smith's beloved wife, Mattie, died of cancer. Smith and his son, then 18, watched as Mattie slowly wasted away. One of the most poignant of Smith's essay was the one published June 12, 1953, entitled "Her Voice Was Ever Soft, Gentle, and Low." After her death, he was inconsolable. Friends at the college were worried that he would suffer a nervous breakdown, and he threw himself with even more intensity into his work. In addition to his editorial responsibilities, Smith taught doctrine and theology at the college. His life was extremely disciplined, and he arrived promptly at the office at eight every morning and left at five with several briefcases full of work for the evening.

His marriage to Willadean Bowerman

In 1954 he married Willadean Bowerman in Knoxville, Tennessee. They had met earlier that year when he spoke at her church during a seven-night revival meeting. She was playing the piano. The new Mrs. Smith moved to Springfield, and she served as the college librarian until his death. The Smiths traveled extensively as the Baptist Bible Tribune became more well known. By 1974, the circulation of the Tribune was 27,000.

Smith's final days

Noel Smith said in a 1958 editorial, "a great many of us, like Peter, got a bad start; let us, like him, have a splendid finish." His health had been failing for almost a year, and although he said little about it, those who knew him, knew that he was not feeling well. He came into his office at the regular time, and he stayed as long as ever, but there was something about the way he held himself and the way he walked that revealed he was having problems. There was fluid building up in his chest, and although he was treated for it, he continued to go downhill.

He was working on the Tribune the night he died. He had been writing about the balm of Gilead the Friday evening, and although the manuscript was just a rough draft, one could see where he was headed. He had written in large letters across the top of the page: “There has always been balm and the physician for those who avail themselves of them.”

A large host mourned his death

His funeral was Tuesday, January 15, 1974.
Tributes to Noel Smith

“We’ve been friends since 1930. I suppose … longer than any two preachers in the Fellowship. I certainly respected him, not only as a true loyal friend and an outstanding preacher, but as a great writer.”

— G. Beauchamp Vick

“Dr. Noel Smith was one of the founders and leaders of the Baptist Bible Fellowship International. His pen was one of the solidifying forces that kept us together through the years.”

— A. V. Henderson

“He’s been a blessing to the Baptist Bible Fellowship down through the years. At the beginning of the fellowship his courageous stand for what was right and for the truth did a great deal to mold and shape the thinking of many of the men that started the Fellowship.”

— Wendell Zimmerman

“I have known him to be a sharp writer, eloquent speaker and a real Bible scholar. He is probably one of the most outstanding contributors to the Christian news media and Christian relationships of any man of his age. He’ll probably go down in history as being even greater than he seemed to us who have know him during these years.”

— Verle S. Ackerman

“I have never known a man with a keener mind, one whose articles have been a blessing to multiplied thousands, nor have I known a man with greater devotion to Christ than Noel Smith. He was a natural born writer and in my opinion one of the greatest in this generation. He was a man of deep conviction, and stood for what he believed without wavering.”

— W. E. Dowell, Sr.

— From the Baptist Bible Tribune, January 25, 1974, p. 4.

“I consider the late Noel Smith as a true intellectual and one of the top editors and writers of the twentieth century. As we enter the 21st century, the legacy left by him will live on, becoming a stabilizing force that will help fundamental Baptists stay the course. His enduring influence will be proof of his outstanding qualities.”

— John W. Rawlings