

Noel Smith

Founding editor of the *Baptist Bible Tribune*

By Norma Gillming

NOEL SMITH WAS THE EDITOR AND FOUNDER of the *Baptist Bible Tribune*, published in Springfield, Missouri, and mailed to 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 Fundamentalist*, 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.



Noel Smith, 1900-1974

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, in the High Street Baptist Church. The officiating clergy were David A. Cavin, pastor of High Street Baptist Church; G.B. Vick, president of Baptist Bible College where Smith had served as Theology Chairman for 24 years; W. E. Dowell, executive vice-president of the Baptist Bible College; and Bob Jones, Chancellor, Bob Jones University. More than a thousand people were there to pay loving tribute to this man. He truly had a “splendid finish.”

He summarized his life this way:

I can't remember that I ever had an easy job. When I was a boy, it wasn't easy to get up at 5 o'clock in the winter and make fires in the bedroom and in the kitchen. As often as not the slab wood was half green. There were no old newspapers. I wasn't allowed to use kerosene, which we called coal oil. Too dangerous. But mostly, too costly. You blew and blew — and froze and froze.

And Monday in winter was worst of all. In addition to the fires, I had to draw water out of the well to fill the tubs and the iron kettle, so Mama could wash. Had to get up earlier on Monday; school started at eight. The well-bucket's rope was always frozen. I had no gloves. What did a strong boy need with gloves?

And then, when I began to “grow up” — say, about 12 — it wasn't easy to get up at 4:30 and carry a paper route, which included Billy Goat Hill. I walked and toted the papers in a big satchel.

And 15 years as a railway express messenger were not easy years. And preaching the gospel during the “Hoover” depression were not easy years. Mostly, I was paid with God-bless-you's instead of the shekels of the sanctuary. “Brother Smith, this has been the greatest meeting we have ever had in this place. All these precious souls saved and added to the church. Brother Smith, I wish I had \$5,000 to give you as a token of appreciation for this great work.”

I would have settled for \$5.

And more than 20 years of the *Tribune* haven't been easy years. In addition to the work on the *Tribune* I have always carried a full teaching load. I do all my research, and most of what I write is pecked out on my personal typewriter. It is hard work. And the hours are long, day and night. And it's lonely work.

Most all my work, from my childhood, has been lonely work. But I have no complaints. And my work has had, and is having, its rewards. I choose to do what I am doing. And because I know it is worthwhile.

Not another like Noel Smith

Noel Smith? What was he really like? He was an original. Many times it is possible to meet people who remind you of other people. Not so with Noel Smith. I never met a man who reminded me even faintly of him. He was unique. He saw life from a totally

different viewpoint. He was self-motivated to a degree I have seldom witnessed, a man of high attainment who seemed totally unaware of his genius. He was unaffected, modest, humble, and yet his opinion was sought by world leaders. He did not have to prove anything to anybody; he knew who he was. He was a realist — an idealist realist.

Condensed from Norma Gillming, *The Best of Noel Smith*, (Springfield, MO: Self Published, 1985).

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 known 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