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Smith Wells: Stagecoach Inn on the Nine Mile Road

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By the middle of the nineteenth century the forging furnaces of western expansionism had wrought a tough breed of pioneers who were making their way into the Uinta Basin of eastern Utah. As early as October 3, 1861, the date President Lincoln established the Uintah Indian Reservation in that area, some white settlers were circumscribed by reservation boundaries. Other whites followed to establish trading posts among the Utes and to perform government service in connection with the newly named Indian lands.¹

By 1879 most all Utah Utes had been forced from their traditional homes and were living on the Uintah Reservation. Following the Meeker incident that same year, the White River Utes of north-

western Colorado were also relocated to the Uinta Basin. Their southern Colorado neighbors, the Uncompahgre, although nonparticipants in the Meeker tragedy, were arbitrarily sucked into the vortex of consequences rising out of that foray. Federal officials moved them into the Uinta Basin as well, placing them on the newly created Uncompahgre Reservation. Even then, neither reservation was free from trespass; encroachment by whites was relentless.

In 1886 the army established Fort Duchesne and sent large contingents of black as well as white soldiers to this outpost. A constant trickle of civilian support personnel complemented the garrison and added ever increasing numbers of white intruders. This presence led to incessant petitioning by whites for the use of Indian-held lands for farming, timber, and mining rights. Various political strategies employed in Washington, D.C., brought about the opening to homesteading of the Uncompahgre Reservation in 1898 and, subsequently, the Uintah Reservation in 1905.²

With the demand for land in the Uinta Basin exceeding the supply in 1905, a clamoring of mankind climbed over every hill and explored every canyon, wash, and pore conceivable in the rugged morphology of this vast primordial basin. The stark terrain encountered by early settlers in the area spawned one of the most interesting facets in the colonization of the Basin by whites. Known formally as Smith Wells, Utah, it was sometimes called Cliff Station but, more commonly, the Wells.

With the establishment of Fort Duchesne the army built a “new wagon road”³ between the garrison and the nearest railhead, Price, Utah. Because the road went through Nine Mile Canyon it was called the Nine Mile Road. It was considered to be an all-season route. Meandering southwest from the garrison, it crossed deep alluvial silt beds and outcroppings of ledge rock as it gradually ascended tilted tertiary beds of the syncline making up the great Uinta Basin. This formidable geography rose to a summit at 7,300 feet, not especially high. But directly ahead lay the craggy Gate Canyon: steep, winding, narrow, prone to floods, matted with bedrock and boulders. That plummeted into Nine Mile Canyon, almost 1,600 feet in seven miles.

³ Navy and Old Army Records Branch, Office of the Chief of Engineers (RG 77), Document W 449, “New Wagon Road,” map and description received from the Adjutant General’s Office, December 31, 1886, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
And while the road through Nine Mile Canyon and Whitmore Park was easy traveling, it reached an altitude of almost 7,400 feet at the head of Soldier Creek. From there to its mouth Soldier Creek was as treacherous as Gate Canyon, except for one thing: between Fort Duchesne and Nine Mile Canyon, via the Bad Land Cliffs and Gate Canyon, there was almost no water. As one writer noted, "The only drink for man and beast was in barrels the outfits carried. For men on horseback and light rigs, it was not so bad, but for the freighters it was different; too much of the heavy loads had to be barrels of water."  

Owen Smith had traveled the Nine Mile Road extensively in its early days and understood the water problems associated with it. He dreamed of finding water in Gamma Grass Canyon, of establishing an oasis in the desert, and of making a potful of money. In 1891, with help from the "witcher of Carbon," Smith located the site for a well. Digging 180 feet into the parched earth, he found his blessed elixir. The water contained salts and minerals that rendered it unpotable for humans, but it remained suitable for animals. With only this mild setback, he moved his family to the area and established Smith Wells, a watering station for all comers. In time Gamma Grass Canyon became known as the Wells Draw, a name that has stuck to this day.

Smith dug his well approximately six feet square and timbered it from top to bottom with cedar trees harvested by axe and brawn in the surrounding hills. The bottom of the well was solid rock, and he created a substantial tank by blasting into this sedimentary layer. Atop the well he positioned a whim, a machine driven by a horse yoked to a long arm extending outward from a center capstan and gear box. Cable is wound around a spool, raising a bucket from the well below. The bucket in this case held more than fifty gallons and worked on a foot valve. At the top of the well a mechanism tripped the valve, and the water flowed freely. Smith caught the water in a holding tank and

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5 The original depth of the well is most often reported as 180-185 feet. Jim Hamilton, who leased Smith Wells in 1907, installed a gasoline-driven force pump on the well in 1917. His son, Richard Hamilton, helped install this system and recalls that it required 165 feet of pipe to reach water. It is possible that in the twenty-five-plus years following the digging of the well it became silted in ten feet or more. And given the fact that well pipes are usually held off the bottom some distance to keep from sucking up mud, 180 feet is good as a probable, original depth. Interview with Richard Hamilton, February 17, 1990, Randlett, Utah.
a system of wooden troughs. The air near the well was cool from evaporation off the wet soil and dampness rising from the wellhead. In such a dry locale the only wet smell sweeter was that of thunderstorms rolling through the pinyon pine forest.6

Smith had not gone into the badlands thinking that just because he had water to sell the people would come. He had traveled the Nine Mile Road and had seen the number of freighters, travelers, mail carriers, and military and Indian agency personnel plodding along the terrestrial ribbon of dust. Before they could reach any Uinta Basin settlement these travelers had first to cross the mighty Duchesne River, and the Nine Mile Road led to the only bridge crossing that torrential barrier.7 For that reason almost all commerce and travel went over the Nine Mile Road and right past Smith Wells. Traffic was heavy.8

Great stockpiles of freight bound for the Uinta Basin filled the docks at Price that year (1891), enough goods that it would take all winter to deliver them. These shipments included supplies to build and maintain Fort Duchesne and the Indian agencies at Whiterocks and Ouray, Utah. Gilsonite from the St. Louis Mine on the Strip and mines at Watson and Dragon was shipped from the Basin over the Nine Mile Road to the railhead at Price. It is reported that 500,000 pounds of the hydrocarbon, about sixty-five wagon loads, were shipped from that city’s docks in mid-January 1891.9 It had all gone over the Nine Mile Road.

In addition, the army had built a telegraph line in 1886. It and the new road had to be maintained. This continual stream of commerce meant people would be passing by; substantial business and sales were in the offing. The young entrepreneur Owen Smith knew what he was doing. Success was almost guaranteed.

6 Hamilton interview.
7 The Duchesne River is nothing compared to what it once was. With the advent of the Central Utah Project and the taking of water from the confines of the Uinta Basin to areas along the Wasatch Front (an average of 57,179 acre feet per year during 1985–91), the Duchesne River at Myton has been reduced to a trickle of its natural flow. Stream flows on the Duchesne River were measured at present-day Myton starting in 1899 and reflect “practically the entire run-off of the Duchesne basin above the mouth of Uinta River.” In the first three or four years after the reservation was opened for homesteading in 1905, part of that flow was being diverted; the Basin had undergone “great irrigation development.” Despite these diversions along the upper Duchesne River, peak flows at “Price Road Bridge station” (Myton) averaged about 4,407 cubic feet per second between 1899 and 1908 and an approximate average continual flow near 2,200 cubic feet per second. This can be contrasted with a peak reading of 1,600 cubic feet per second in 1991, with the mean flow at only 56.9 cubic feet per second. See U.S. Geological Survey surface water reports for the years 1908–91.
9 Eastern Utah Telegraph, January 15, 22, 1891; Vernal Express, December 1907 (holiday edition).
The Smith family built a small frame home close to some nearby cliffs with the road running between them and the adjacent well. Native rock was abundant, and the flat stones were used by Smith and subsequent owners to build almost every other structure at the Wells.

Mrs. Smith cooked daily specials, such as a big pot of chili beans, a kettle of mutton stew, or some other favorite, for weary travelers. That is all she served; like it or leave it. With water and food for sale, and contact with the civilized world in place, more than a modicum of security for travelers resulted. Smith Wells was growing, something that continued for almost twenty-five years.

There was another distinct advantage built into the Wells. Smith’s enterprise was not only in the middle of the thirty-seven dry miles, it lay midway between Vernal and Price, Utah. A twice-weekly stage line had been established on the Nine Mile Road as early as 1888 to carry passengers and mail. By 1889 this had been upgraded to daily service.

It took twelve hours for the stage from Price and the one from Vernal to meet at a turn-around site in Gamma Grass Canyon. No buildings greeted them upon their arrival. The stage company had hay and water hauled there for the stage horses and wood for its patrons’ warming fires. While horses ate and rested a midnight snack was served, passengers and mail were exchanged, and each stage returned to its beginning point.10

In 1891 the stage line negotiated with the newly established Smith Wells for services, including overnight accommodations. Part of the service given in return was a daily divvy of potable water brought in on the stage from both the Bridge (present-day Myton) and from Minnie Maud Creek in Nine Mile Canyon.11 Smith Wells quickly became a refuge for all travelers of the Nine Mile Road.

One story handed down says that Owen Smith became known as “Owing” Smith because he had never paid the witcher. To settle the accusation once and for all Smith framed the receipt he had received upon payment to the water witch and hung it where all could see. Below the framed voucher hung a singletree hitch. One account noted that “If somebody said ‘Owing Smith’, he would point to it and say: ‘I’m Owen Smith alright [sic], but be damned if I’m owing anybody. Now, how would you like me to prove it to you? With this receipt

11 Vernal Express, October 27, 1948; Stewart interview.
or with fist or gun or with that there singletree?" Naturally, the story ended, except as a humorous yarn, told around the campfires."12

Smith diversified his holdings. He opened a general store and post office and added feed for animals to go along with the water dispensed from the well. One of the most legendary buildings at the Wells during the Smith era was a little log cabin Owen built to house female employees. In that cabin a man's gangrenous arm was amputated without anesthetic by an army surgeon. After that the cabin was affectionately called "the hospital."13

Near the turn of the century Owen Smith sold the Wells to I. W. "Ike" Odekirk and opened a store at Myton. Business remained good at Smith Wells. Mining interests had continued to expand, with more mines opening nearer the Wells. Talk of opening the reservation to homesteading increased the number of visits to the area by prominent persons in and out of government. The stage line was busy.

Odekirk enlarged the frame house included in the purchase of the Wells, adding two rooms onto each side of the original frame dwelling. Each room had doors exiting to the front office and dining hall, respectively, as well as outdoors. These four rooms provided more sleeping quarters and established a more hotel-type atmosphere.

By this time someone had built a camp house at the Wells to accommodate freighters. It was a rustic, single-room, rock-walled edifice, dug partially into the hill, with a crude fireplace in one end and a dirt roof. Freighters could throw out their bedrolls and sleep there at no cost.14

All this increased activity brought with it fresh experiences, new faces, and many stories. One could see or hear almost anything at Smith Wells—and life was not dull, especially after the Ute Indian Reservation was opened for white settlement in 1905. Many things changed then.

The Bridge was laid out as a townsite and named after Maj. H. P. Myton of Fort Duchesne. With the prospect of business in a booming new town, Ike Odekirk sold the Wells and opened a general store and

12 Stewart, "The Wells."
13 Both the Stewart and Hamilton interviews substantiate calling this building the hospital. Hamilton explained that as he grew up the cabin was used to quarantine patients during epidemics.
14 Stewart and Hamilton interviews.
This mail station on the Duchesne River was called the Bridge and later became Myton. Persons identified in this photograph are Isaac W. Odekirk, Hannah Odekirk holding infant Preston Odekirk, and Harry Clark. USHS collections.

feed and grain business in the newly established city of Myton. The partnership of Leb Ballenger, George Y. Wallace, and Tobe Whitmore bought the Wells and leased the whole operation to Jim Hamilton in 1907. By then the reservation was inundated with homesteaders, and Smith Wells was in its heyday.

It was said that one could not travel the old freight road more than a quarter of a mile without passing someone, either coming or going. Fifteen thousand immigrants streamed into the Basin to settle the land, and they brought with them increased needs for products and staple commodities. Freighting became the employment of teamsters and farmers alike. Merchants welcomed this service and rotated through all interested teamsters.

The deep silt beds leveling the Wells Draw became one large braided river of powder with as many as eight wagon paths across its breadth; the wagon wheels sank their iron rims deep into the muscle of the earth. As one man described it, "Ya no sooner got inta one rut than ya wished ta hell ya was in another."

From atop a high hill near the head of Wells Draw one could

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15 The Ouderkerk Family Genealogy, vol. 2, ed H. John and Raymond Ouderkerk (Charlotte, N.C.: Delmar Publishers and Printers, 1990), p. 99. The family name has a number of variant spellings, including the two in this note and that used by persons named in the text. All are correct.


17 Hamilton interview.
trace the immigrant road all the way to Vernal by the dust trails streaming skyward and pray to heaven there was a breeze. As many as fifty rigs would stop for the night at the Wells. With two hundred head of horses to feed and water in an evening and hobble for the night, there was always commotion. Manure near the campsite was piled so deep by spring that early automobiles, trying to enter during the thaw, were mired to the floorboards.

Everyone seemed to be in a great hurry. Hard-worked animals would sweat until their coats were sopping wet, and the dust stuck to them in great droplets of mud. Those teams arriving at the Wells from the Minnie Maud in Nine Mile Canyon had flexed their entire beings to the limit in pulling up Gate Canyon, negotiating Slick Rock, and clawing their way over Singletree Hill, work so difficult it often required doubling up teams. They became deathly tired, and peril stalked them in various forms.

Wallace Hyrum Dennis, the writer's grandfather, worked part-time at the Wells as a boy. He told of one such hazard: A drummer (salesman) had pushed his team terribly fast. They were extremely hot and covered with froth. The lad warned the salesman not to water his horses until they were cooled out. The man disregarded his warnings and hurried to water his animals, explaining that he had important sales and business to conduct further on. He lost all four horses—dead from colic. Young as he was, Dennis knew better. He cared for the overheated, hard-worked stage horses as they pulled into the stop and were changed out for rest and recuperation.

It is hard to know now just how much water was actually dispensed from the well over the years, but from the beginning, there was a charge for the water. Prices changed over the years in keeping with the economy, but some prices around 1910 were: $1.50 per team, 25 cents per head for cattle or horses, and about a penny for each head of sheep; in later years it cost 10 cents to fill the radiator of a car.

Jim Hamilton, a dog lover, wrote at the bottom of the price list: "Dogs

18 Ibid.
19 Colic in horses is caused by several conditions, including obstruction or twisting of, or spasms in, a hollow organ. Symptoms are marked by sudden, recurring, convulsive attacks causing shortness of wind (breath), thus adding to the stress on the animal. In the most severe cases shock sets in and the animal dies. The account noted in this study was most probably brought on by the drinking of a quantity of cold water on an empty stomach while in a heated condition. This would have been a horrible sight to witness as four otherwise healthy and beautiful horses would have whinnied in pleading tones, snorted, heaved, kicked, and rolled with pain until stress crushed their ability to withstand and they succumbed. The owner's actions would be recorded as totally unconscionable. (Telephone conversation with Dr. Blaine Whiting, DVM, Basin Veterinary Clinic, Roosevelt, Utah).
Drink Free.” Large herds of sheep and cattle grazed in the area in those days, and as many as 500 head of cattle were known to water there at one time quite easily. Not all who passed the Wells partook of its bounty. Prices were too high for some, given individual circumstances, and they would circumvent the Wells by taking stock upwind and around.20

During this boom time patronage at Smith Wells was so heavy that the Hamiltons hauled in potable water in quantity from the Duchesne River. In addition to the main house and hotel, the store, the little log “hospital,” and the camp house, there was a hay house, a smoke house, an ice house, a forge, a chicken coop, an assortment of barns to house the stage horses, and two outhouses: men’s and ladies’. Across the draw from the complex, in the mouth of Duke’s Canyon (named after a favorite horse of the Hamiltons who died and was taken there to repose in peace) was a sheep-shearing corral and dipping vat. The Wells was a virtual beehive of activity.

As always, the summer months were the most active and the hottest; but no one noticed the heat—they were too busy. For a kid at play it was a spree to run and hide and hunt and chase in the cedar-trimmed hills around the well. The hotel kitchen was not immune to childhood antics, and an occasional “cow pie” down the chimney would send everyone scurrying for air. The store was always open to attack from nimble fingers sniffing out sugar candies and other delights. But all was not play.

Hamilton hired a schoolteacher to tutor the children of Smith Wells, with classes held in the hospital cabin. These children had chores to do, sure; during winter months they had to have the old blue ribbon saw singing its song by 2 p.m. or they would be stacking firewood into the cold of night. But chores were all part of childhood, and when residents of the Wells went to a well-earned rest at night they embraced slumber to the calls of coyotes in the distance.21

Mrs. Hamilton was providing short-order meal service by this time and employed the help of her daughters and a number of others in addition. The dining room contained one very large, long table encircled by chairs. The sheer numbers of hired help could almost fill it when their turn to eat came. Aromas from Mrs. Hamilton’s home-style cooking wafted potently through the air, mixed only with the

20 Hamilton and Stewart interviews; interview with Maxine Burdick, February 20, 1990, Duchesne, Utah.
21 Hamilton interview.
This map of the Smith Wells site drawn by Cherie Hale is based on a field map made by Dorothy Sammons-Lohse in April 1981 with additional historical data supplied by H. Bert Jenson. The map is not to scale. When Smith Wells was in use the road was some 50 feet from the house.
scent of pinyon pine smoke curling up from the stove pipe chimney at the rear of the house. These luring smells beckoned to hungry passersby.

Besides meals, many people wanted just to buy bread. The Wells could not keep bread in stock. Homemade, it went out in loaves and in sandwiches for the road—along with a river of freshly brewed Arbuckle's coffee. Pies, cinnamon rolls, and other pastries were favorites as well but for the most part reserved as desserts with meals sold inside.

This culinary symphony required some well designed preparation areas. Cellars holding potatoes, carrots, and other perishables lay close at hand, and a large army cook stove graced the kitchen and maintained a thirty-gallon tank of warm water. Someone fashioned a sink, built entirely from wood, and carved largely by pocketknife. It came complete with corrugated drain board, was very convenient, and much used.22

Smith Wells seemed very much a living entity—its people its heartbeat. Besides the local notables, like the wild-horseman Tex Brown who kept his money tucked behind armlets but in plain view and ol’ Empty Sleeve, the one armed sheepherder;23 other, more distinguished persons played out scenarios there too:

Emma Lucy Gates sang one night after supper dishes were cleared away. Tommy Birchell, the cowboy baritone; Charlie Stewart, the whistling sheepherder; Ralph Cloninger, the Salt Lake player, all went through their paces by lamplight for the assembled residents and wayfarers and it was all for free. Almost every night, there was some sort of entertainment. Senator Reed Smoot, Governor William Spry, Congressman Don B. Colton and other high government officials slumbered in the rock-walled rooms adjoining the dining room.24

Another source of enjoyment for residents of the Wells were the decked-out freight rigs. These brightly painted wagons, their scrolled lettering set off by pinstripes, provided visual fascination. Color-coordinated tassels hung from horses tails and center rings; others tossed about from atop the hems (hames). Some early denizens of the freight road attached bells to harnesses that, with the rhythmic cadence of the horses' steps, created a cheerful musical sound. The teamsters, who had traveled to interesting places and met many people, told

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Stewart, “The Wells.”
captivating stories of their sojourns. Despite their wide-ranging experiences, they were as glad to see the Wells as that community was to see them.

It took seven days to make a round trip over the Nine Mile Road. The early freighters were accustomed to sleeping under their wagons, under the stars, wherever night overtook them. The gait of their horses determined how far they could go in a day, and normal speeds led to the formation of regular stopover camps. Understandably, one of these favorite stops was Smith Wells. So eager were these weary teamsters to reach the Wells that they would sometimes extend their day greatly—pulling in at midnight.

Luckily, Smith Wells boasted a street light, a very large lantern that was refueled daily. It sat upon a pole and had a bonnet, so it cast its light down and out, illuminating the grounds on dark nights. By its light many a freighter and stage passenger found the way to warm quarters. The camp house quite often overflowed, and in the coldest weather some freighters took shelter in the straw-bedded barns housing the stage horses.

The freighters enjoyed the services provided at the Wells. For one thing, because of their numbers, there was not enough natural feed to take care of all the animals along the Nine Mile Road. Teamsters were forced to haul several bales of hay to feed their teams along the way. Like the barrels of water hauled in the days before Smith dug the well, hay was heavy. One service furnished by the Wells lessened this burden. For ten cents a bale freighters could store part of their hay in the hay house, saving weight on their wagons until the return trip.

Teamsters usually carried a small quantity of oats to feed their horses along the road, and it was common practice to cradle eggs in the grain to keep them from breaking. The men cooked the eggs for meals farther down the road. The demand for fresh eggs kept the Wells in short supply.

Whatever inconsistency night may have brought these teamsters, morning was relentlessly regular. The Wells awoke early, every day!25 Before the sun came up, before the eastern sky was even light, sojourners at the Wells could hear the sound of quiet voices speaking to rested horses and the muffled slap of leather as yokes and tugs were fastened to chains that punctuated the stillness with their jingle.

25 Hamilton and Stewart interviews.
Freighters who had concluded their business the night before were bidding farewell to everyone as the rooster stretched his neck to bid welcome to the morning's first rays. The only thing moving faster than morning activities at the Wells was progress itself. Welcome or not, some changes were inevitable.

The telegraph had been replaced with a telephone exchange in 1907. As a subscriber to the new service the Wells was on a party line, with the ring at the Wells being eight long tones! At a time when a young man was paid $1.00 a day for labor and rooms cost 50 cents, meals 35 cents, and blue jeans only 90 cents, a local telephone call might cost between 30 and 80 cents and a typical call to Heber City, the county seat in those days, a whopping $3.00 or more! Like the telephone, other new technology was changing the face of commerce all over western America. Despite the boom Owen Smith's oasis dream had enjoyed for over twenty years, the Wells was becoming more of a mirage with each passing day.

As early as 1905 there had been a sudden drop in commerce along the Nine Mile Road. The Uintah Railway from Mack, Colorado, into the Dragon and Watson mines in lower Uintah County took over the ore shipments that formerly came past the Wells en route to Price. In the beginning the changes in traffic were subtle and almost imperceptible. For one thing, there was such a trampling surge of humankind trumpeting the opening of the reservation to white settlement that same year that no one noticed much of a change. Besides, Gilsonite shipments from the St. Louis Mine and the newly reopened Pariette Mine actually increased (as many as five railway carloads per month were shipped from the Pariette alone). Although the full impact of the Uintah Railway would not be felt for several years, commerce along the Nine Mile route was becoming more attenuated with each passing day.

Gradually, freight shipments past the Wells dropped noticeably. Many commodities bound for Vernal went to Dragon on the train and were then freighted by wagon to merchants in Ashley Valley. Even government entities used the new means of conveyance part of the time, which further diminished the viability of the Wells.

Then, in 1912 the army abandoned Fort Duchesne, and several lucrative freight contracts fell empty. A stage line between the railhead

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26 Builders of Uintah, p. 314; Hamilton interview and ledgers from the general store at the Wells and kept by Hamilton.
27 Gibson, "Industries, Other Than Coal"; Vernal Express, March 24, 1906, p.3.
at Dragon and Vernal competed with the Nine Mile route for passengers, weakening another support structure of the Wells. By 1915 an improved road had been built from Theodore (Duchesne), Utah, to the railroad at Colton, via Indian Canyon and Willow Creek. Some teamsters used this new road, further diminishing travel through Wells Draw and Nine Mile Canyon. Finally, the Strawberry road southeast of Heber City was being continually improved. It was no longer necessary for travelers from Salt Lake City or the Wasatch Front to go through Price to get to the Basin. This further reduced commerce along the Nine Mile Road. The Wells slowly became more of a service point for herders than travelers. The boom days were gone.

The Hamiltons had relinquished management of the Wells in 1911. They returned in 1917, but in the early spring of 1922 Jim Hamilton left Smith Wells for the last time. The only truly free spirits to leave were the forty head of horses he turned loose to find companionship among the diminishing wild horse herds. Although several others struggled to keep the well in operation after Hamilton’s departure, Smith Wells, the legend, would never rise again.

Once it was abandoned, scavengers in search of wood and plunder removed much of its physical essence, and a careless match swept the rest away in a ghostly inferno; the rock walls tumbled. Within a few years a flash flood filled the well itself with mud and debris.28 Today, all that is left of Smith Wells are a few deteriorating rock walls, indentations of cellars irreclaimable, and stubby cedar posts—remnants of the stage horse barns—oh yes, and a few names high on the ledge rocks where residents left their mark on nature.

Yet, the quintessence of Smith Wells lives on. This stagecoach inn was more than just a group of buildings in the middle of Utah’s badlands. It was a vital link in the preservation and forward movement of man and beast in the early history of the Uinta Basin, a resting place for travelers who otherwise would have suffered thirst, hunger, and weariness before reaching their destinations. In the words of one historian, “Its history ... has all the flavor of the early western scene. Soldiers, cowboys, outlaws, Indians, homesteaders; the great, the near great and just plain people, all were here, played their brief roles, stepped off the stage and into legend.”29

28 Hamilton and Stewart interviews; taped recollections of the writer’s grandparents, Wallace and Gladys Dennis, in his possession.
29 Stewart, “The Wells.”
Ask anyone with roots in the Uinta Basin and invariably that person’s family history will contain a yarn about the Wells: how Mom and Dad met there and fell in love; how frozen fingers were saved in that wonderful kitchen; or how children’s laughter resonated from the cliffs of Wells Draw when Grandad took the whole family on that great wagon trip to see the Utah State Fair. At the very least, Smith Wells is a great legacy in the history of eastern Utah and especially of the Uinta Basin, a beacon in the window of an untamed land, a refuge where water was king.