

Cleft of the Rock – Mark Smith's journey to God

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on November 23, 2015)

I read this book at the suggestion of The Oak Ridger's Donna Smith. It is not the usual history of Oak Ridge or unusual historical material I tend to drift toward. It is a personal and spiritual growth story written by a local husband and wife team, Mark and Frances Smith.

It is about the time in Mark's life when at 19 years old, he dropped out of college, quit his job, sold all he had to get enough money to go to Nome, Alaska, to accept a position as a missionary assistant working with a group home associated with a small congregation meeting in a church building he had helped the missionary minister there build just three months earlier.

That short trip to Alaska had an amazing impact on Mark's life. He just could not get the children, the church and the building he had actually help build, out of his mind. So when Will West called him to offer him a real job doing what he so desperately wanted to do anyway, Mark jumped at the chance.

The only problem is when he had traveled 7,000 miles and arrived in Nome, Alaska, he was met by Will West. The first thing Will had to tell him was that the state had pulled the funding for the job. Will only had funds for a single month. This had been learned by Will while Mark was in Anchorage, getting outfitted for the needs of living through the often 40 below zero winter in Alaska. Will had waited to tell Mark the sad news face to face.

This news hit Mark like a sledgehammer. He says that his anger was quick to rise at that time of his life. It did so then. At hearing the news, Mark felt he had to get away from Will. His anger was raging and knowing that controlling it was going to be impossible, the first moment he could manage it, he got away to himself. He just started walking...

The way Mark chose to deal with the impact of the devastating news was to get by himself and rage against his misfortune. He started climbing the nearest mountain, Anvil Mountain. He did not take any extra clothing, not even a jacket. His single thought was to get alone and think. Soon he was far away from the buildings and climbing ever higher on the mountain.

He realized just how cold he was becoming as through the haze of his depressing thoughts he saw that he had reached the very top of Anvil Mountain. He had gotten there quickly as much of the way he had raced ahead moving ever quicker as his rage drove him.

His mind had blocked out the reality of the storm that was brewing and blowing hard now from the north. His perspiration froze on his body as did the tears on his face. His single layer of a thin shirt was no protection at all. He was freezing. When it dawned on him how serious his situation had become, he blindly sought any area he could find that would get him out of the wind or at least provide some shelter.

He was stumbling along a worn path with his head bowed and his arms sheltering his eyes and face when at the base of the rock formation that gives the mountain its name, a large anvil shaped pile of huge stones, he saw an opening back into the rocks that he thought would give him some relief from the wind.

Knowing enough to realize hypothermia sets in quickly in such stormy weather conditions, Mark instinctively knew he had to do something and he was some six miles from the warmth of the houses. He had only one chance, get out of the wind! So he crawled well back into that crack in the rock shaking and already losing control of his body as hypothermia set in and uncontrollable shaking started. Once he got still, blackness came over him and he passed out.

Sometime later Mark roused up and when putting his hand to his face, he felt it was actually warm. That was not what he had expected. Remembering what brought him to be in the crack in the rock, with the wind still howling and the storm raging, yet warm he was and dry.

His first thought was, God is taking care of me, even in this storm, God has placed his hands over the cleft in this rock and caused warmth to protect me. Don't you know Mark was expecting the worse and here he was alive and warm in the close fitting shelter of rock pressing against three sides of his body.

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Mark would later reflect on this experience and take as a theme for his life and his service to God the last part of Exodus 33:22, “...I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by.” Like Moses, Mark felt the presence of God in that “cleft of the rock” on Anvil Mountain.

From that moment on, and Mark did get down off the mountain as the storm let up. Mark has looked to God to guide his life. When he at last arrived back near the church and group home he was guided by several lights shining his way. It was a search party forming to look for him, thinking there was no way he could have survived that night of stormy weather. But he had. In the cleft of the rock!

Will’s wife, Denise, is the one who gave Mark the encouraging words that put the final touch on his determination to stay out the year even without the paying job. She convinced him that there was much to do there with the young church and group home of children and they needed his help. She assured him that God would provide and he would grow from the experience. And God did and Mark did!

The experience in the cleft of the rock made Mark even more determined than ever to let God lead in his life. He truly felt something special had happened to save his life there. He just knew God had a purpose for him in Alaska. So, he set out to listen to God, to read daily in the scriptures and to be attentive to all that was happening around him.

Mark did spend the entire year there. He did get work and even made enough money to live on and put some back in savings. He worked with the children, he got to know the people well. He helped build entrance steps to homes. He worked as a bookkeeper and at the local hospital.

All the while God was giving Mark experiences that caused him to believe more and more that he was being taken care of in a special way. And undoubtedly the experience made a lasting impression on Mark and determined the course of his life since. The last seven weeks of his stay in Alaska, he was the interim pastor for the church there as Will and Denise took a well-deserved break.

In 2013, Mark and his wife, Frances, returned to Nome, Alaska. He showed her the church building, the entrances to homes he had built that were still functioning some 33 years later! Although not stated by Frances in the epilogue to the book, I wonder if he even showed her the “Cleft in The Rock.”

Frances, being a communications professional has obviously had a large part in the writing of Mark’s story of his year in Alaska. She says of her life with Mark that she is amazed by him and his dedication to the Lord’s work. She has worked as a public relations manager in Oak Ridge, he is active in the homebound ministry of the Sevier Heights Baptist Church in Knoxville.

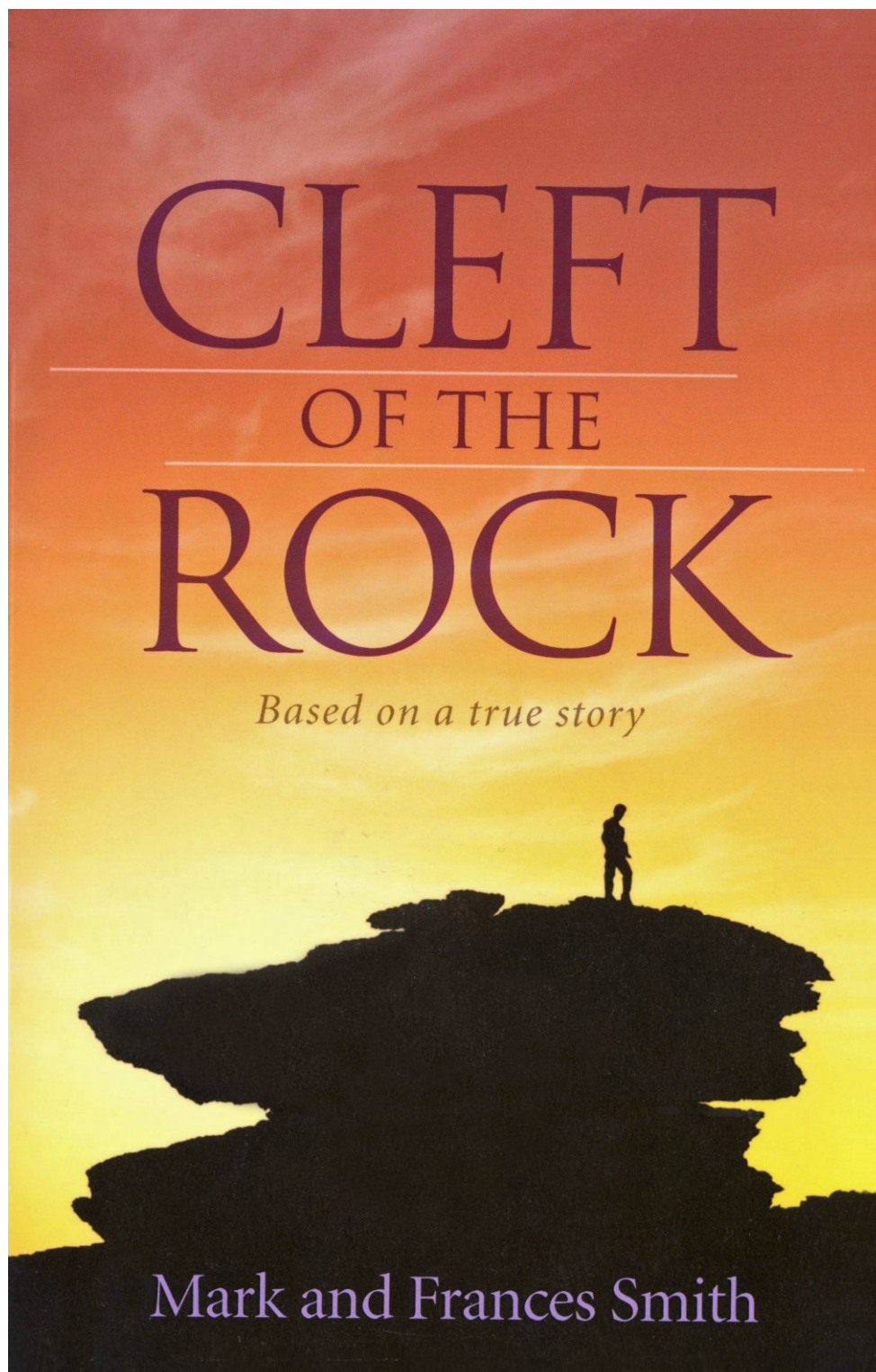
They have formed Cleft of the Rock Ministries (www.cleftoftherock.org). Frances says, “It is my privilege to tell the story with him, and it’s our hope that it will bless and inspire someone else.” It sure hit a fine note with me. I enjoyed reading the down to earth details of Mark’s year in the harsh winter of Alaska and his eye opening experiences that continually built up his faith in God.

Frances has a most effective writing style that is easy to read and tells the essence of daily life without any attempts to overload the reader with unnecessary detail. Her wealth of dialog in the story, which she labels as fiction because some parts of the story are not built exactly on factual circumstances, takes the reader along in the mind of Mark in a way that creates understanding for why he feels God’s presence in his life.

I am pleased that Donna suggested this book to me. It was a refreshing read. I highly recommend it.

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A personal journey told with honesty and insight that comes from a local loving couple sharing their life experience – Mark and Frances Smith