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Book review: The story of the 'Salt Lake Cemetery,' where David O. McKay, Porter Rockwell and Utah's famous lie

By Deseret News | Jan 14, 2019, 7:00am MST

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GRID VIEW



Corey Rushton is one of the authors of "Salt Lake Cemetery," published by Arcadia Publishing.



"SALT LAKE CITY CEMETERY," by Mark E. Smith with Corey Rushton and Anastasia Hirt, Arcadia Publishing, 128 pages (nf)

SALT LAKE CITY — Any cemetery is a silent mirror of the community which created it, and the Salt Lake City cemetery is no exception.

The particularities of Salt Lake City, resting as it does at the intersection of the American frontier and American religious history, are given memory in this new book — the latest in the "Images of America" series — by Sexton Mark E. Smith, Corey Rushton and Anastasia Hirt.

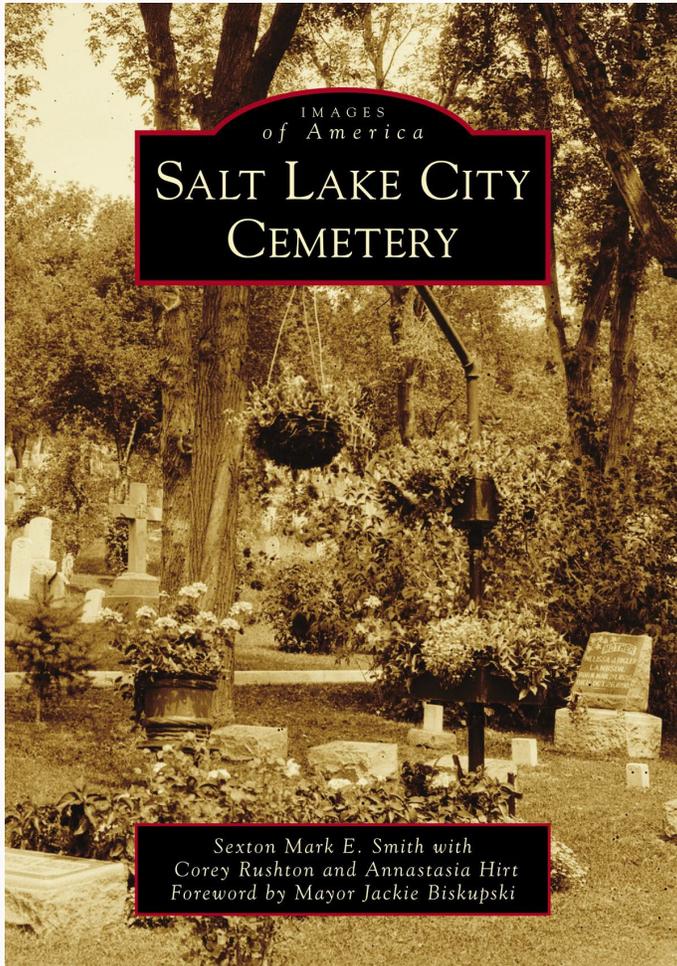


Sexton Mark E. Smith is one of the authors of "Salt Lake Cemetery." | Provided by Arcadia Publishing

In the summer of 1848, two infant children of pioneers Melissa and George Wallace died of “diarea,” as George Wallace recorded it. Like many migrant families in the American West, the Wallaces buried their children wherever they could; in the Wallaces’ case, on a dry hill overlooking the fledgling city. But the valley settled by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was also characteristic for its formidable organization, and within a year church leaders decided to cease ad hoc burials in what is today Pioneer Park, and instead find a place for a modern cemetery. George Wallace pointed to the lonely hill where his children slept, and today the city cemetery is the largest municipally operated cemetery in the United States.

The Salt Lake City cemetery itself — and the ways in which it testifies to us about death and the past — is characteristic of modern notions of burial in the Western world. At the same time the Wallaces were burying their children, older graveyard sites around churches in the densely populated hearts of cities were fading in popularity. Modern ideas of medicine and the growing

crowds drawn to the work of industrial centers meant that, for reasons of disease and space, urban burials seemed less and less appealing or possible.



"Salt Lake Cemetery" is by Sexton Mark E. Smith, Corey Rushton and Anastasia Hirt. | Provided by Arcadia Publishing

The decision, then, for Latter-day Saint leaders of the time to move their burials to a professionally managed site out of the way of the city's water and food supply was entirely in keeping with the time. So was its design. European architects like Christopher Wren and John Loudon conceived of the cemetery as a garden. Far from dense churchyards, where graves were often piled atop each other, and crypts, columbarium walls and other such space-maximizing designs were at a premium, the garden cemetery was to look like a park.

Nineteenth-century garden cemeteries — and the images in this handsomely illustrated book reveal that the Salt Lake City Cemetery certainly fit the model — were densely planted with bushes, trees and hedgerows and were snaked with paths winding between the marble and granite monuments. In Victorian garden

cemeteries, these monuments stood tall; statuary, weeping angels, broken columns and other ornate images of mourning were the norm. Such images complemented Victorian grieving rituals. Black clothing and crepe, complex funeral processions and sobbing family members seemed appropriate among the towering statues of the garden cemetery.

But the Salt Lake City cemetery has evolved with the times. In it, as in many garden cemeteries, paths have been reclaimed as burial space has gradually become a premium. Dense growth has cleared in favor of a simple trees-and-lawn design. Statuary has been replaced with simpler monuments. In the lawn cemetery, as it is called, death is commemorated less with the elaborate mourning rituals of the Victorian age and more with an aesthetic of quiet simplicity. These cemeteries are designed to encourage us to associate death with peace.

Of course, despite such encouragement, cemeteries have also always fascinated us because of their association with the macabre. Ghost stories, after all, are almost always ways of remembering, coping with and perhaps exorcising the unquiet dead. As the book observes, Salt Lake City, with its history of religious innovation, frontier conflict and economic experimentation has as rich a history as any.

Much of the book chronicles the interesting burials the cemetery claims, from church leaders like David O. McKay and Emmeline Wells to more notorious figures like the erratic outlaw Gunplay Maxwell, killed in a pistol duel in 1909, and the unfortunate Lilly Gray, whose tombstone mysteriously reads "Victim of the Beast 666."



President David O. McKay, president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is buried in the Salt Lake Cemetery. | copyright IRI

Content advisory: "Salt Lake City Cemetery" is appropriate for all ages.

If you go ...

What: Sexton Mark E. Smith, Corey Rushton and Anastasia Hirt book signing and reading.

When: Thursday, Jan. 17, 7-9 p.m.

Where: The King's English Bookshop, 1511 S. 1500 East

How much: Free

Web: kingsenglish.com

Note: Places in the signing line are reserved for those who purchase a copy of "Salt Lake Cemetery" from The King's English.

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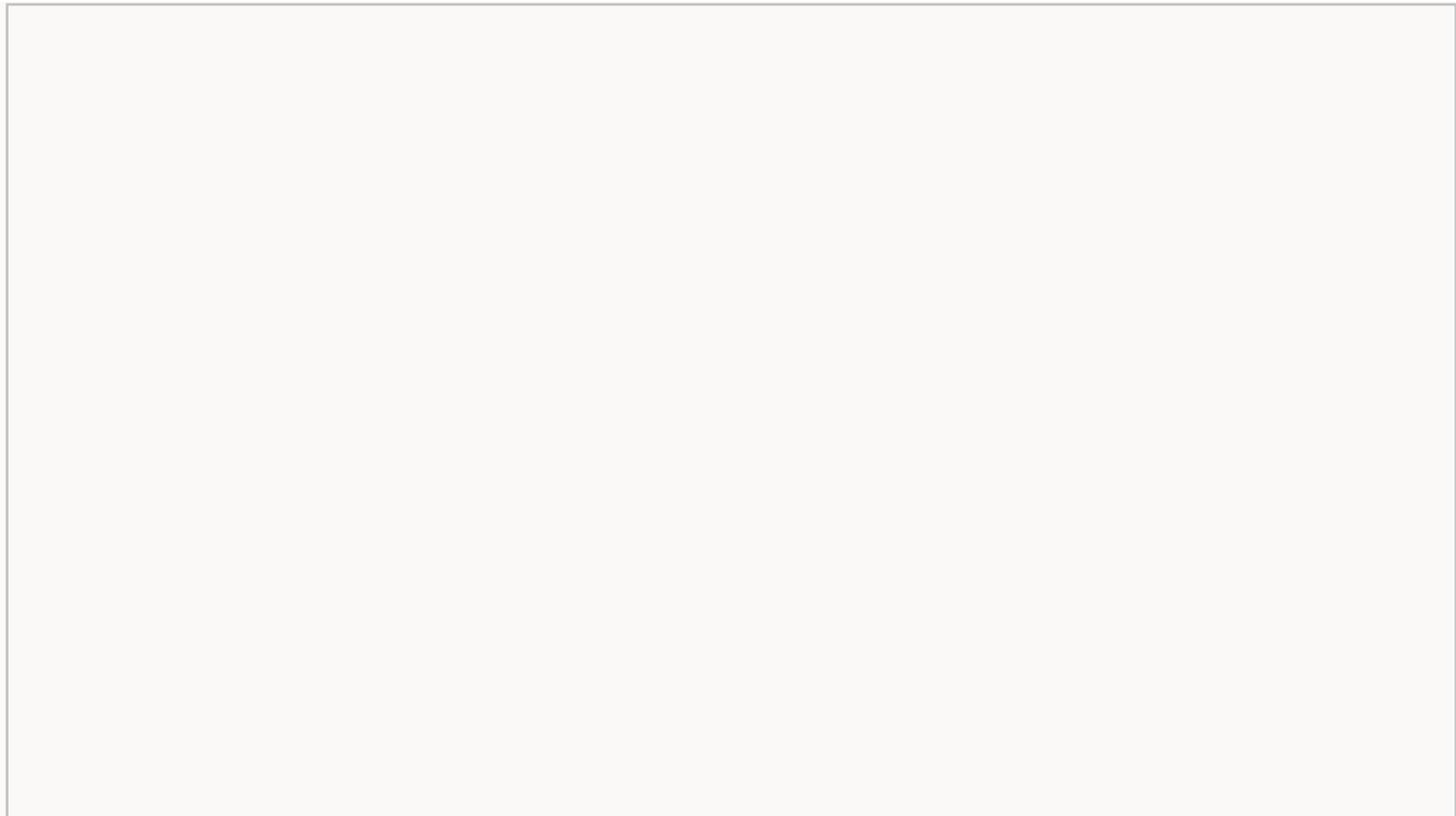
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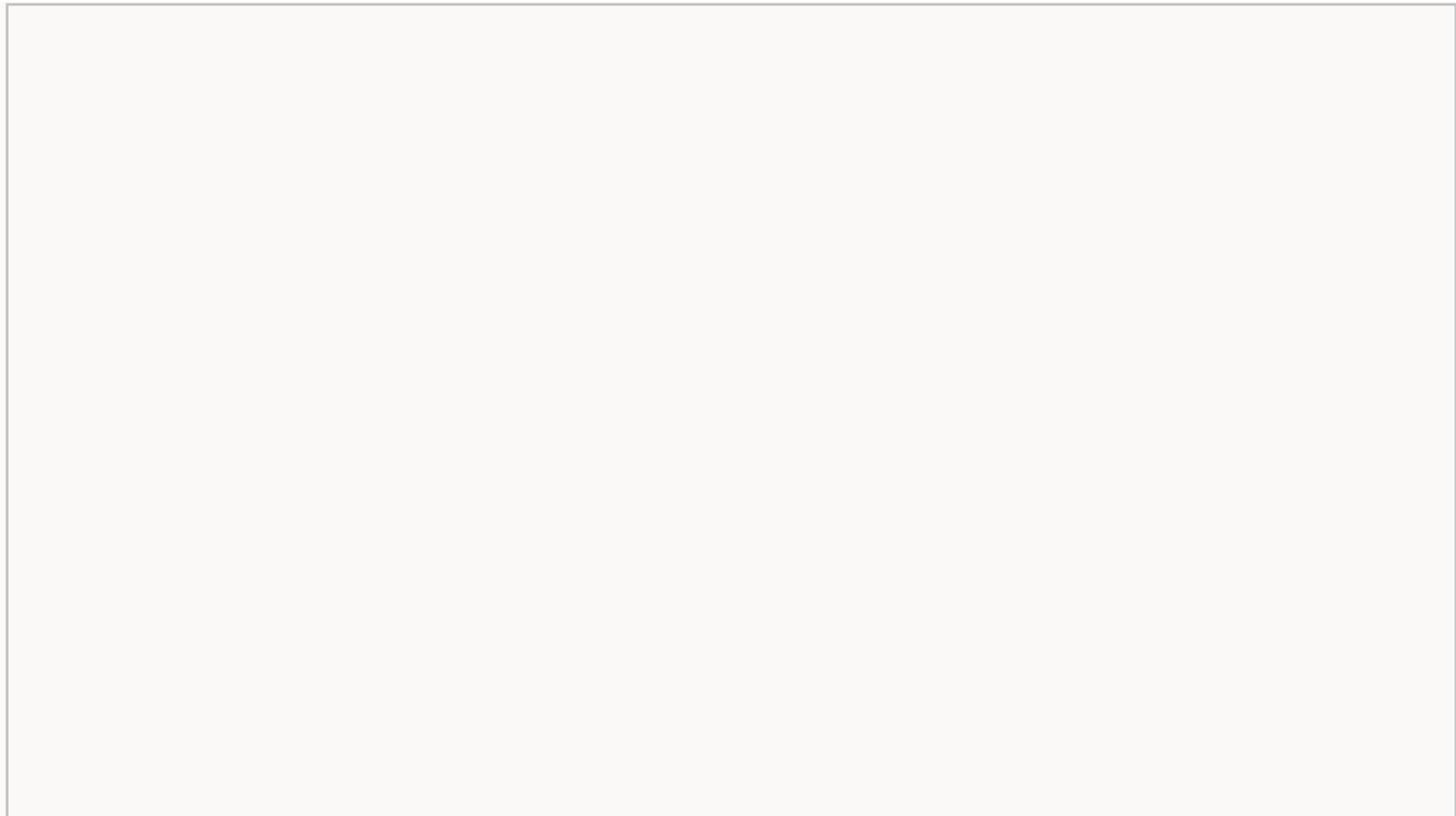
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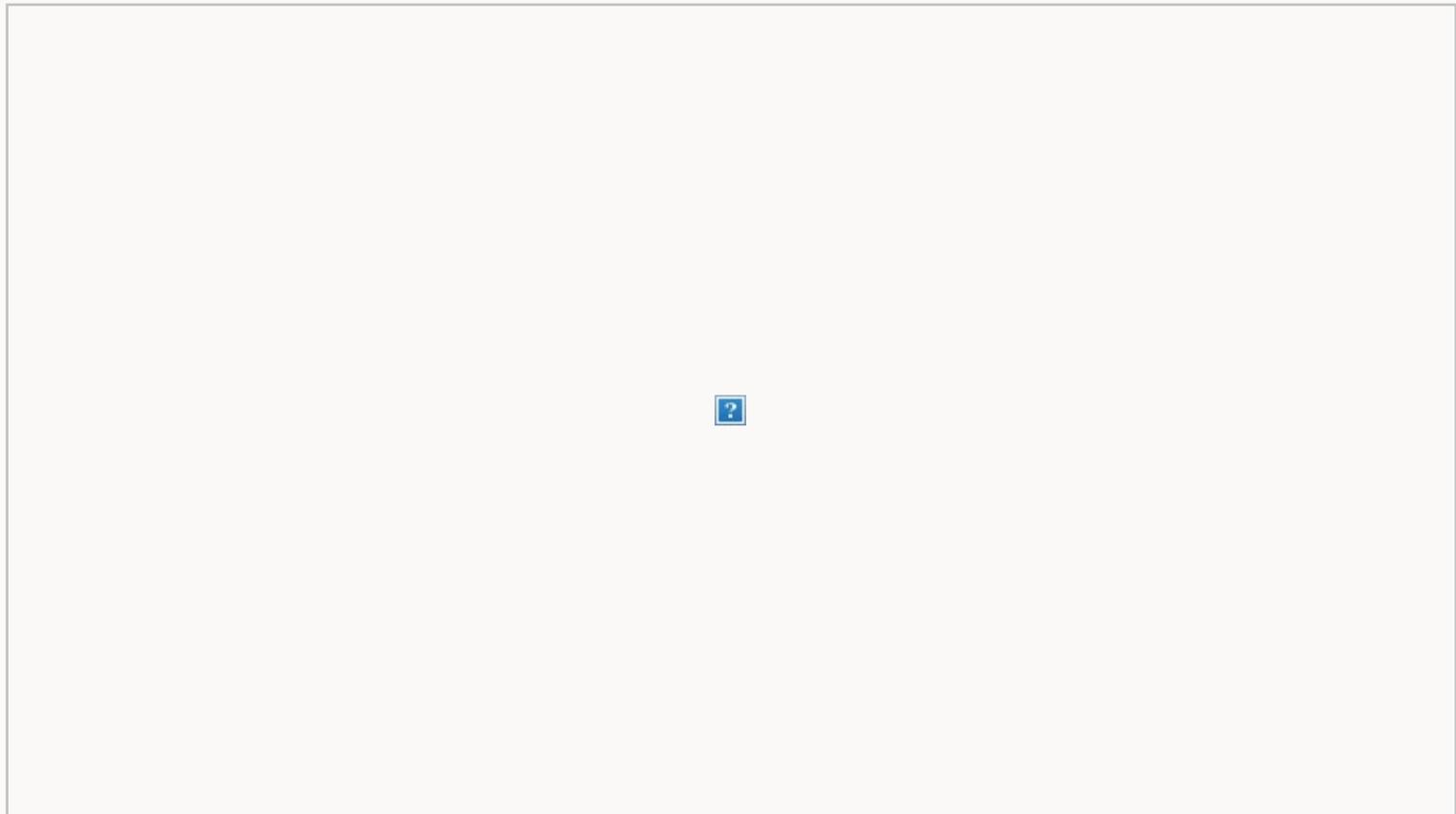
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