



## City Of Wichita – Previous City Managers

**Eugene N. Smith (November 13, 1952-November 15, 1955)  
(November 22, 1955-March 12, 1956)**

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Born: February 3, 1895 - Presque Isle, Maine

Died: December 7, 1976

Interred: Wichita Park Cemetery

E.N. Smith's death Tuesday at age 81 ended 15 years of quiet retirement for the man who served Wichita for 27 years in a variety of government positions, including city manager.

But his tenure as Wichita's 10th and 12th city manager was far from quiet.

The story of his fall from and return to office in November 1955 is of more import to the city than most people knew when it happened.

The '50s were stormy times for city government here. City managers went through office as through revolving doors.

But in the midst of one of those storms, Smith stood up for principle - the city manager's authority over his staff.

He lost his job because of that stand. But he also set a precedent for managers to come.

He went to work for the city as building inspector in 1934 and became director of services in 1945. He was appointed city manager in 1952 as a result of one of those recurrent storms.

Manager Monty Jones was suddenly fired by the city commission.

While Commissioners L.A. Donnell (father of present Mayor James Donnell) and William Salome repeatedly asked for reasons for the firing, the majority of the commissioners - Walt Keeler, Floyd Amsden and Mayor Russell Jump refused to give them, and outvoted the two.

Such was the tenor of the commission; City manager was not a job that guaranteed long tenure.

Smith's trial by fire - or firing - came three years later as the result of his controversial efforts to reorganize the police department.

At the Nov. 8, 1955, commission meeting, Police Chief R.L. Price bypassed the manager and took his case to the commissioners.

Price publicly blasted Commissioner A.E. Howse, saying Howse had brainwashed Smith on the need for reorganizing the department. He also said that he no longer took departmental problems to Smith, but to Commissioner James Gardner.

Strong personalities and complex issues were involved. But regardless of the pros and cons of the issue,

Smith faced one hard fact - Price had bypassed his boss, making Smith a city manager who no longer had authority over his employee.

After that stormy meeting, Price left town for a Kansas Peace Officers meeting in Topeka. Smith phoned him and arranged for a meeting in his office upon Price's return.

"Why don't you fire me over the phone or by telegram?" Price said.

"I don't do business that way," Smith replied.

Following the next commission meeting, Smith told the commissioners he planned to fire Price.

A majority of the commission objected to that move, but Smith said he had to fire Price for bypassing him. He told them retention of the chief after the attack on Howse and himself would be intolerable.

He also said the action was his legal right.

Suddenly, a special commission meeting was called for 9 that night. Split again, the commission fired Smith before he could fire Price.

Mayor Claude DeVorss, Gardner and E.E. Baird voted to fire Smith. Howse was opposed. H.D. Lester abstained from voting.

The next day, Smith arrived at his office at 9 a.m. and began packing.

To reporters, he said, "After all the talk of the commission about separating the policy-making powers and the administration, I thought I was clearly in my proper authority.

"But now it seems like they want to be the administration too.

"If I had it to do all over again, I'd do it the same way."

Contacted in Topeka, Price said, "I feel sorry for E.N. Smith, but then I feel sorry for anyone who wouldn't take advice or see the light."

Then, one week later, the commission rehired Smith in what DeVross called an effort to gain harmony and stability.

Interim City Manager Emory Cox resigned from the shortest tenure in that office, and Smith's first assignment from the commission was to find his own replacement. He also had to promise he would not fire Chief Price.

And so it was over as suddenly as it had begun.

But a principle had been stated, acted upon and fought out in public.

Smith's replacement - in 1956 - was Frank Backstrom. Smith became director of public works until his retirement in 1961.

Since then a succession of strong city managers have administered the city's affairs. More than once, a manager has fired employees the commission did not want fired. And managers have steadfastly refused to fire employees the commission wanted out. Those battles have not been fought in public as was Smith's.

They've been in executive session, where more than once a manager has put his job on the line. The

commission has the right to fire the manager. But only the manager has the right to fire his employees.

As present City Manager Gene Denton put it, "The governing body sets policy; but the manager is in charge of personnel. It's one of the most basic principles of the commission-manager form of government. It's what makes it work.

"Sometimes," Denton added, "a manager has to force his own firing to protect that vital principle."

E.N. Smith did just that.

His 27 years of public service are his monument. But it is crowned by that day in 1955 when he stood his ground and lost his job for a principle.

Survivors include his widow, Ruth A., at home, 660 S. Roosevelt; a daughter, Mrs. Shirley Duncan, Tucson, and a half-brother, Lynwood P. Thompson, Stratford, Conn.

Lahey's Crest Hill Mortuary has charge of arrangements.

*Article courtesy of Staff Writer Jon Roe, Wichita Eagle-Beacon, December 9, 1976*

#### **Other Interesting Facts**

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