

Mayor George Lewis-29th Mayor of Lehi 1944-45

By Richard Van Wagoner

Typical of early Lehi elections, most citizens voted straight ticket, look at the party rather than the man. Thus it was common for the Democrats to win a term and then two years later all would be shown the door as a slate of Republicans were ushered into office. Such was the case when George A. Lewis defeated two-term incumbent Mayor Dean Prior in 1943 during the midst of World War II.

Mayor Lewis's supporting cast of officials consisted of holdover B.J. Lott, J. Ferron Gurney, Harold W. Barnes, John S. Broadbent, Wane Christensen (councilmen); Leland Powell (recorder); Blanche Turner (treasurer), LeRoy Davis (justice); and Clemn Turner (marshal).

The new mayor was born in Lehi on May 4, 1889 to Henry and Jane Sarah Goody Lewis. He married Ruia Bushman in 1908 and spent a lifetime farming, ranching, and raising poultry. Aside from his term as mayor, Lewis also worked for four years as a deputy Utah County Assessor, was president of the Lehi Lions Club, president of the Lehi Civic Improvement Association, and served a twelve-year stint on the Old Folks Committee.

Mayor Lewis was in office on May 8, 1945--Victory in Europe Day (V-8 Day). When Japan accepted the Allied terms of surrender on August 14, 1945, Lehi's Main Street was clogged with dancing, jubilant people. Cars all over town honked in noisy unison, while the city fire truck, siren blaring and lights flashing, made victory rounds about town.

As the war ended and servicemen came home to begin life anew, a legion of new businesses sprang up in Lehi during Mayor Lewis's administration as well as Mayor Dean Prior's third term. In June 1944, when the Allied D-Day invasion of France was taking place, Armond E. Webb purchased the former People's Co-op property on State Street. He sold all the building on the site except the People's

Store, which he opened under his own management. In July 1945, just three months after President Roosevelt suffered a fatal stroke at Warm Springs, Georgia, Edward S. Fox and Arthur T. Powell opened the Lehi Black Plant near Emsco Refractories northwest of town. Two months later Leland and William Price built a new grocery store on Main Street which became the popular Price Brother's IGA. During September, Raymond Stewart established the Stewart Lumber Company north of the Lehi Rodeo Grounds.

Just before Christmas, 1945, Ferd Evans opened the Evans' Cafe at 120 West Main. In March 1946, Ralph Worlton opened Ralph's Cafe and Lodge Room in the old cafe building at 198 East State. Three months later Harold Hutchings introduced a complete line of sporting good in connection with Wattie Watkins' Lone Eagle Trading Post on Main Street. In September 1946, the Lehi Opera House, formerly the Cozy Theatre at 154 West Main Street, was remodeled into the Utah Theatre by George W. and Cleon Leany.

Lehi City Corporation's 1944 budget was a mere \$43,492.54, a minuscule amount compared to today's multi-million dollar budgets. Interestingly, Lehi librarian Gudrun Wathen's salary was \$60 per month. Marshal Clemm Turner was making \$90 a month, and Leland Powell, the highest paid Lehi official (clerk/recorder) was earning an astounding \$180 per month.

During Mayor Lewis's administration, the question of a city-wide sewer system was first raised. A \$9,000 bond was floated and an engineer was employed to initiate a preliminary survey and draw up plans. The administration also inaugurated a community-wide garbage collection and disposal service.

One of the most absorbing happenings of Mayor Lewis's administration shows how differently citizens in the 1940s viewed corporate liability. On July 24, 1945, twelve-year-old Paul Bennett was riding his brother Dick's horse behind the Memorial Building. Suddenly the animal, which had been grazing on the Athletic Field grass, dropped to the ground throwing its rider clear. Eight-year-old Jesse Bennett, playing nearby, ran to the horse's aid, thinking it had stumbled.

Unbeknownst to the boys, the animal had been electrocuted when it came in

contact with a pipe draining water from the Memorial Building basement. Young Jesse grabbed the electrified pipe and immediately became immobilized. His quick thinking brother ran into the building, found the circuit breaker, and turned off the electricity saving his brother's life.

The Bennett family did not bring a multi-million dollar lawsuit against Lehi City for its culpability in the matter. Instead Clifford and Dorothy Bennett sent a well-reasoned August 10, 1945 letter to the city council itemizing their financial losses (\$50 for the horse, 78.20 for the family's loss of work).

Lehi City officials responded immediately. The city attorney drafted a document by August 25, which released "and forever discharged Lehi City ...from responsibilities for injuries or damage to the person or property or both...resulting...from an accident...where the horse of the undersigned was killed and Paul Bennett and Jesse Bennett were injured." In exchange for signing the release the Bennett's received a \$128.20 credit against their city utility bill.

Retrospectively the resolution of the matter was so simple. An accident happened on city property. The injured party petitioned for redress. The city responded immediately. Within one month the matter was satisfactorily settled.

Not all city matters were so easily mediated, however, and after one term fifty-six-year-old Mayor Lewis opted not to seek re-election. In retirement he continued his long-term association with the Civic Improvement Association, as well as abiding his poultry and ranching interest. When the former mayor died on December 22, 1984, he was ninety-five years old, Lehi's oldest man.