

Mayor Israel Evans-6th Mayor of Lehi

By Richard Van Wagoner

Mayor Goodwin's successor, elected on February 11, 1867. was Israel Evans, son of Bishop Evans. If my candid treatment of him offends any descendants, I apologize, but his controversial nature cannot be sidestepped. Born in Hanover, Ohio on October 2, 1828, Israel, after serving in the Mormon Battalion, came to Lehi in the fall of 1850.

During his 1867-69 administration, all land in the surveyed Lehi township was registered with the Federal land office making it possible, for the first time, for citizens to receive deed to their property. Interesting laws passed during Mayor Evans's tenure included: "An Ordinance in Relation to Lehi City Brand"; "An Ordinance in Relation to Sidewalks"; "An Ordinance Naming the Streets of Lehi City," and "A Resolution in Relation to the Fencing of the Lehi Fields".

While the newly elected mayor accumulate considerable power in the community, he alienated many people in the process. The earliest incident of his local difficulties occurred in 1861 when charges were brought against him by two other members of his Mass Seventies Quorum. John Murdock accused him of "abuse" and Porter Rockwell charged him with rustling one of his oxen and butchering the animal.

At the conclusion of an ecclesiastical trial conducted by Brigham Young on January 26, 1861, Evans was adjudged guilty and disfellowshipped from the Seventies until such times as he gave full Satisfaction of his doings." During the trial, Brigham Young not only called Israel a thief, but also said that his father justified him in the larcenous behavior. In a January 28, 1861 letter to Young, however, Bishop Evans wrote that "as soon as I learned what he done I told both him and Brother (Alfred) Bell that they had done wrong and should satisfy Br Porter's demand and make it right and when they did not do it I told the Seventies that I wanted them to decide the case."

Israel mended his ways and was reinstated to his former position, but he and he and his father's unrelenting control over mercantile activities in the community in the late 1860's and early 70's, caused considerable turmoil in town. Bishop Evans was president of the Lehi Union Exchange, which had been established in 1868. Israel was one of the firm's directors. The two men attempted to use their power to crush Harwood and Bradshaw and the People's Co-operative Institution. But these competitive businessmen would not kowtow. James Harwood was excommunicated. His partner, Richard T. Bradshaw, who publicly called "our dear beloved bishop a pot-bellied son-of-a-B, went so far as to "deck" the bishop with a punch as the two men passed each other on Main Street.

William W. Taylor, prominent churchman and partner in the People's Co-op, along with his brother Thomas, and Thomas r. Cutler, did not engage in fisticuffs with the bishop. But he had few kind words to say about him:

"I believe if (Bishop Evans and Israel) could rob us of home (,) bread and everything we possess, and then trample and abuse and force us out of the Church of Jesus Christ and send us to destruction that they would rejoice in the act....I have seen so much of a wicked malicious spirit from this Father and son and a few of their tools that it mars my peace of mind to think or write anything about them".

Other complaints were brought against Israel Evans in 1878. These difficulties had their roots in a failed United Order project through which Evans had angered others. Seeking to get even with him, they saw their chance when he grazed his animals, apparently out of turn, in the communal "Big Field".

A Bishop's Court was conveyed. Bishop Evans withdrew. The case was then heard by William Winn, Bishop Evans's second counselor who was also the bishop's son-in-law. Winn judged that his brother-in-law, Israel, had not harmed anyone and therefore should not be assessed damages. He did recommend, however, that Evans should apologize to the field committee. But Evans, a headstrong man like his father, refused to do so. "We had considerable trouble in Lehi during the summer with the Bishop and his son Israel," wrote William Yates in an updated 1879 diary entry, "and a good deal of contention in our meetings."

The younger Evans was finally called before the Utah Stake High Council, who ruled against him on the “Big Field” issue. Ward members were given the opportunity to have the final say, however. According to the family account, “one Sunday the vote was put to the Ward members--not as to whether Israel was guilty, but as to who would sustain the High Council. Israel’s name was never mentioned but everyone understood that a vote for Israel would be a vote against the High Council.”

Though not excommunicated, Evans quietly withdrew from all his church and civic responsibilities and devoted the remainder of his years to the ranch and family, pursuing legislation which eventually established the Brigham Young Agricultural College (Utah State University), and supporting the Lehi Sugar Factory. He died on May 31, 1896, having lived in Lehi longer than any other citizen.