

John R. Murdock-Lehi's Third Mayor

By Richard Van Wagoner

1861-63

The American system of democratic government developed, in some degree, from early town meetings where men elected their officials and freely debated personal beliefs. During the first forty years of municipal elections in Lehi and elsewhere in Utah, the People's party ran unopposed, and were always elected unanimously since there was no opposition.

An example of how this system worked can be studied in the diary of Lorenzo Hill Hatch, who served in the Lehi Ward bishopric from 1852-63. On February 6, 1856, under the direction of Mayor/Bishop David Evans, Hatch "made out a list of names for the City officers to be elected if the people chose to do so". On August 1, 1858 he was "called up by bishop Evans to go call the teachers together to arrange for the election", and on February 13, 1859 he noted that he "was appointed or elected as Alderman",

As Lehi historian Hamilton Gardner put it in 1913, "nomination on the People's Party ticket always insur(ed) election." This procedure, closely resembling the Mormon custom of sustaining leaders with an "uplifted hand" rather than by secret ballot, remained in force until after the June 10, 1891 dissolution of the People's Party. Thus when I tell you that John Riggs Murdock, People's Party candidate, was "elected" Lehi mayor on February 11, 1861, you have a better understanding of what that statement truly means.

Mayor Murdock, perhaps Lehi's best known early citizen outside the community, was born September 13, 1826 in Orange township, Ohio. His parents, John and Julia Clapp, were intimates of Joseph and Emma Smith in Kirtland, Ohio. Julia C. Murdock died in childbirth on May 1, 1831, leaving the newborns and three other children, including four-year-old John R.,

motherless. John Murdock, realizing the impossibility of raising the family himself, elected to distribute his children among friends.

John R. was sent with the Caleb Baldwin family to Jackson County Missouri where he lived in the Morris Phelps family. The survival of the newborn twins, named Joseph and Julia, depended on a woman who could nurse them. Within days, Joseph Smith, Jr., sent word to John Murdock that he and Emma, who had lost twins of their own on April 30th, would take the children and raise them as their own.

Young John Murdock, stricken with measles, died in March 1832, after being exposed to the elements when the Prophet and Sidney Rigdon were mobbed in Hiram, Ohio. Julia Murdock did not know until adulthood that she was not Joseph and Emma's natural daughter. John Murdock later explained that after he gave up his twins, "Sister Smith requested me not to make myself known to the children as being their father: It was a hard request (but) she wanted to bring the children up as her own and never have them know anything to the contrary that they might be perfectly happy with her as their mother.

But Julia, when she finally discovered who her real parents were suffered considerable torment. "Mine has been no easy life," she wrote to her brother, John R. in 1858, three years before he became Lehi's mayor, "(Why) could (I) not have been raised with my own blood and kin and not with strangers and bear a name I had not claim to?" Emma and Joseph had not been remiss as parents, but Julia lived under the social stigma of the Prophet's polygamy, telling her brothers that some persons believed that "Joseph Smith was (her) father but that (her) mother was some unfortunate girl that was betrayed by him."

When John R. showed his father Julia's letter, the elder Murdock wrote to her, inviting her to come to Lehi and meet him and the rest of the family. There is no record that she ever came west to Lehi, however.

John R. Murdock eventually reunited with his father in Nauvoo,

Illinois in 1839. In 1846, he started west with the Cornelius P. Lott family and on July 16th, while camped in Council Bluffs, Iowa, he and his brother Orrice enlisted in the Mormon Battalion. As privates in Company B, they marched to San Diego, California, where they were discharged in 1847.

In 1849, after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, John R. married Almira Lott, daughter of Cornelius Lott. Both families moved to dry Creek in the spring of 1851 being among the first settlers in the Lehi area. Young Murdock secured forty acres of land and heartily engaged in farming activities, canal building, and Indian Fighting.

In the fall of 1856, he was one of the hardy men who struggled through deep snows and mountain passes to rescue the tragic handcart companies stranded on the high plains of Wyoming. A year later, he and four other men were selected by Brigham Young to convey Colonel Thomas Kane across the plains as expeditiously as possible to intercede for the Mormons in Washington during the “Mormon War”.

Murdock, a superb horseman, during the summer of 1857, while carrying mails from the Great Salt Lake Valley to Independence, Missouri as an employee of the B.Y. X. Company (Brigham Young Express), set an unbroken record in crossing the plains. In the mail service of that era, sixty miles a day was the average speed of carriers. Murdock traveled the distance in fifteen days, averaging eighty miles a day, and only changed animals three times.

Murdock’s trail skills served the LDS Church well. Many Mormon converts arrived in New York or New Orleans with little more than the clothes on their backs. They required church assistance to get to the Great Salt Lake Valley. Numerous Lehi townsmen were “called” during the 1860’s to help with these church-sponsored immigration expeditions.

The first wagons with Lehi teamsters left Salt Lake City for Florence, Nebraska, in April 1861. The town’s quota consisted of five wagons, forty oxen, five thousand pounds of flour, and six men: Captain John R. Murdock

and drivers Martin B. Bushman, Albert Goodwin, Thomas Karren, George McConnell, and J. Edgar Ross, my great-grandfather. Four and a half months later the company returned to Salt Lake City, each wagon filled with eight to twelve immigrants.

Captain Murdock ultimately served as wagon master for five more “down-and-backs.” Ultimately, the famed frontiersman crossed the plains eleven times during his lifetime including the summers of 1861 and 1862 when he was the town’s mayor.

His tenure as Lehi mayor was from February 27, 1861 until 16 February 1863. During his summer absences James W. Taylor served as mayor pro tempore. One of the first items on Mayor Murdock’s agenda was a survey of all property owned by the municipality. The committee on revenue, after making a painstaking inquiry, reported that “the city’s wealth consisted of three small drums and one large one...all very much in need of repair.

Another source of adversity during Mayor Murdock’s administration was the invasion of blackbirds in the spring of 1861. The plague was so acute, especially to young crops in the Big Field, that the City Council, under Mayor Murdock’s direction, established a bond and arranged shooting contests to put an end to these marauders.

In the spring of 1864, Murdock was called and ordained bishop of Beaver, Utah by President Brigham Young. He occupied that position until 1877, when he was chosen Beaver Stake President, a seat he occupied for fourteen years. Serving eight terms in the Territorial Legislature, and one in the Utah State Legislature, Murdock was a member of the Constitutional convention, which framed the Utah State constitution in 1895. He also served as long-time probate judge of Beaver county, and a colonel in the Iron County Military District. A founder of the Murdock Academy, a branch of the Brigham Young Academy. John R. Murdock died at the home of a daughter in Fillmore on November 12, 1913. The former Lehi luminary is buried in Beaver City Utah.

