

Mayor Samuel R. Thurman-Lehi's Ninth Mayor

By Richard Van Wagoner

The local uproar caused by James W. Taylor's challenge to the 1873 elections resulted in a new slate of officials in 1875 when Mayor Winn was called on a mission to New York. The only holdovers from Winn's administration were J. Wiley Norton, city attorney and recorder Joseph T.H. Colledge.

Winn was replaced by former Mayor Isaac Goodwin. Other political newcomers included alderman Samuel R. Thurman and John Cherrington, the local postmaster. Neophyte city councilmen included William Goates, James T. Powell, Martin B. Bushman, and my grandfather J. Edgar Ross and my great-grandfather J. Wiley Norton. The newly "elected" marshal, Peter Christofferson, refused the office and Byron Brown was chosen in his place.

When William H. Winn returned from his missionary assignment, he was again elected mayor in 1877. following an ecclesiastical dispute with Bishop David Evans, Winn was removed from the bishopric and sent on a distant mission to Texas. His replacement as mayor was twenty-eight-year-old alderman Samuel R. Thurman.

If any boy was destined to be a lawyer/politician it was Thurman. Few were surprised at his success in legal circles; he new how to argue. Meandering into Dorton Brother's Meat Market on Main Street, the young man ordered 10 cents worth of peanuts. When Dorton handed him the sack, Thurman replied, "I don't believe I want them, so I'll trade them for some candy." When he was handed the candy he started out the door with both the peanuts and the sweets. "Hey, wait a minute, you haven't paid for the candy yet," Dorton yelled. "But I traded my peanuts for it," replied Thurman. "Yes, but didn't ever pay for the peanuts!" the merchant responded. "Well, I didn't want peanuts" the boy exclaimed. "You would sure make a good lawyer," responded Dorton as his snatched back his sack of peanuts.

Samuel Richard Thurman (originally Thurmond), was born in Hodgenville, Kentucky, on May 6, 1850. He graduated from Locust Grove High School and Sonora Academy in Kentucky before following his elder brother George William to Lehi in 1870. Billy, as George William was affectionately known locally, while serving as Lehi City attorney and schoolmaster of the Southwest school, was shot to death by a rowdy youth on Christmas Eve, 1871.

Following his 1872 marriage to local girl Isabella Karren, young Samuel Thurman followed in his older brother's footsteps by teaching school and studying law in his free time. Following his admission to practice law, in the First Judicial District Court of Utah in March 1879, Samuel left for Ann Arbor to attend the University of Michigan Law School.

In January 1881, after returning from his studies, he, and another local Lehi legal talent, David Evans, Jr., got a chance to strut their stuff during an forensic clash in the Lehi Music Hall. Two Reorganized latter Day Saint missionaries provided fierce opposition. The overflowing audience listened attentively as the men debated the issue: "Resolved That Joseph Smith III, is necessarily the proper president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." The consensus of opinion, no doubt swayed by religious bias and favoritism, was that the Lehi men were victorious. One month later, Thurman was again elected Lehi mayor.

On November, 22, 1882, two months before his second term was up, Mayor Thurman resigned in order to move to Provo and "devote hereafter his whole time to the practice of the law." The city council did not appoint a successor. For the remainder of the term Alderman George Webb presided over council meetings.

In 1884, after David Evans, Jr., returned from his legal training at Ann Arbor, he and Samuel Thurman formed the partnership of Thurman and Evans. When Evans was appointed assistant U.S. district attorney in 1886, Thurman became a partner with George Sutherland who would later serve on the U.S. Supreme Court from 1922-38. The partnership later expanded to include William H. King, who eventually became a U.S. Senator.

Thurman's prominence grew during his tenure in the Utah territorial legislature where he served from 1882 to 1890. In 1884, in the wake of Grover Cleveland's election to the presidency, a sizeable number of young Mormons and gentiles began working towards establishing the Democratic party in the state. Their efforts were known as the Sagebrush Democracy.

When Thurman was nominated as the party's delegate to Congress, he became the first person to run for Congress from Utah on a national party ticket. Unfortunately he lost handedly to the People's party candidate John T. Caine, who had the backing of the LDS Church leaders.

Although the Sagebrush Democracy movement was viewed as an advocate of obedience to national laws, including those against polygamy, Thurman took a second, wife, Victoria Adelaide Hodgart, on July 16, 1897, just nine days after the Democratic committee on which he served adopted its anti-polygamy constitution.

On August 16, 1889, eleven days after his reelection to a fifth term in the territorial legislature, Samuel was arrested and charge with unlawful cohabitation. At his preliminary hearing he was represented by his associate George Sutherland. Assistant district attorney David Evans, Jr, his former partner, prosecuted. the case was bound over to the grand jury, but Thurman, whisked away to an LDS mission in far away England was never indicted.

In 1893, Democrat Thurman was appointed an assistant U.S. district attorney by newly elected President Cleveland. He also served as a delegate to the Utah constitutional convention in 1895 where he was instrumental in obtaining suffrage for women. Years later, Utah's first congresswoman, Reva Beck Bosone, declared, "The women of Utah should bow low to ...that great supporter of women's rights, Samuel R. Thurman."

In 1906, after forming a partnership with Edgar A. Wedgewood, Thurman moved to Salt Lake City where Thurman, Wedgewood, and Irvine specialized in water and irrigation litigation although Thurman was also chief assistant to the legal department of the Denver and Rio Grande Railway between 1893 and 1912.

For years Utah's Democrats suffered under the effectiveness of Republican Sen. Reed Smoot's political machine. In 1916 when Democrats Simon Bamberger, William H. King, and James H. Mays won the offices of governor, senator, and congressman, Thurman who had long served as chairman of Utah's Democratic party, was appointed a justice to the Utah State Supreme Court.

Following his term as chief justice from 1927 to 1928, he was defeated and retired to his private practice. When he died at this Salt Lake City home on July 12, 1941, he was ninety-one years old. Colleague Delbert M. Draper said of the regal old Democrat:

It is easy to describe the spirit of Samuel B. Thurman. It began in good humor, it grew in tolerance, and ended in love and charity. No man ever looked upon life with more kindly humor. No man was ever more ready to find a tolerant reason for the frailties of his fellowman. No one ever came to the end of a long career with more solicitude for the welfare of his family and friends, his community, and the world.

Such a superb tribute to a former Lehi mayor, one of our own native sons who found fortune and fame far beyond the boundaries of our town.