

Mayor Dean Prior-28th Mayor of Lehi
1940-43; 1946-47
By Richard Van Wagoner

As had been the case in earlier local elections, the issue of the Lehi Municipal Power Plant was the principal concern during the 1939 race. Local Republicans, led by mayoralty candidate Edward J. Larsen, campaigned on the theme, “Vote Straight Republican--Our Power Plant is Not for Sale.” Opposing candidate Dean Prior, responding to the “malicious falsehoods being circulated by some members in our community” responded by affirming that he and his fellow Democrats, stood behind the Lehi Municipal Power Plant 100 per cent and are opposed to any consideration, scheme, plan or talk of the sale of same.”

Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt, who slowly brought the country back into economic recovery after the Great Depression, was immensely popular in America. Riding on this upsurge of approval for the democratic Party, Prior was elected as Lehi’s 28th mayor in a contest decided by a vote margin of just 32 votes. The officers who served with Mayor Prior during his 1940-43 administrations included: Joseph E. Smith, Hyrum A. Anderson, Jay K. Haws, Howard Ricks, Sylvester Evans, B.J. Lott, Eldred M. Fox, Ernest Peterson (councilmen); Leland Powell (recorder); Inez Peterson (treasurer); Arley Clark/Niron Fowler/Rex Gardner (marshal); Don Mack Dalton (attorney); Junius C. Banks (justice).

While America’s economic prospects began to improve by 1940, when Mayor Prior took office, fifteen per cent of the nation’s work force still remained unemployed. It took a jump-start from World War II to bring the country, and the world, out of monetary malaise. Initially, as in the early years of World War I, the United States remained neutral over the war in Europe. But U.S. sympathies were unquestionably with the “Allies”--England, France, Poland, Finland, Russia, and China.

As in 1914, U.S. involvement in World War II was delayed, but probably

inevitable. America attempted to curb Japanese aggression by cutting off the sale of oil and scrap metal to the militaristic regime. In November 1941, Japanese and American officials met to resolve as diplomatic talks broke off Japan began planning a secret attack on the United States.

The week leading up to the 1941 “date that will live in infamy” was a peaceful, holiday atmosphere in Lehi. Broadbent’s announced the opening of their fabled Toyland. Cary Grant and Irene Dunne were starring in “Penny Serenade” at the Royal Theatre. Coach Ross Neilson was shaping up the high school basketball team and a school play, “Romance in a Boarding House”, was presented to an appreciative audience on Friday night.

On that cold Sunday morning, 7 December, many townspeople first heard the news from KOVO radio commentator B.S. Bercovici. Japan had launched a surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Early Monday morning, students arriving at the high school gathered at the central staircase and with patriotic hands over their hearts listened to the school band play a never-to-be-forgotten rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner.” Meanwhile in the nation’s capital, Congress was declaring war against Japan. Three days later Germany and Italy declared war on the United States.

Lehi’s National Guard Unit, the 222nd Field Artillery Service Battery, left for active duty 9 March 1941. Despite a high casualty rate in the areas they served, all fifty-seven men returned home safely to an October 1945 discharge.

Though no local guardsman’s life was lost in the war, thirteen Lehi men were among the 1,450 Utahns and more than 400,000 Americans who did die in the service of their country. Lehi Families, like Americans everywhere, did their utmost to assist in the war efforts. Urgent need for war materials caused many shortages in consumer goods. To ensure equal distribution and fair prices of available products, rationing was instituted on a national basis.

School bus ranges were also reduced, the school day was shortened one

hour, and car pools were formed to conserve gas and tires. Many Lehi workers--particularly women, who were encouraged to help the war effort by taking jobs outside the home--found work in defense industries. Especially notable was the \$30,000,000 Remington Small Arms Plant in Salt Lake City, which employed 10,000 during its peak years.

As the war progress other items were rationed--meat, butter, sugar, fats, oils, coffee, shoes, boots, gasoline, and canned fruits, vegetables, and soups. Aside from rationing, Lehi citizen's lives were affected by the war in a multitude of ways. Initially there was fear of Japanese attack; as part of civil defense preparations, organized under Mayor Prior's direction, air raids, and "blackouts" were practiced. Outside Christmas lighting was also forbidden during the war years.

Housing shortages existed across America, particularly in areas near defense plants. Because of the great number of military personnel stationed at Camp Williams and the huge work force at the Geneva Steel Plant, Lehi was especially hardhit by the housing shortage. The National Housing Agency, in business to lease homes and building and remodel them into living quarters for war workers and their families, succeeded in increasing the available rental units in town.

In June 1943, Emsco Refractories Company leased the new \$600,000 war industries brick plant at Lehi Junction. This factory, which employed forty Lehi men at the outset of operations, manufactured silica brick for use in the blast furnaces at Geneva Steel and elsewhere in the west. In the fall of 1946 General Refractories Company of Philadelphia purchased the plant from the War Assets Administration for \$375,000.

"Victory" was the catchword on everyone's lips in 1943. Lehi had a Victory Road, and the town's miniature parade became "The Victory Parade." Citizens planted victory gardens, raised victory pigs and calves, and participated in the nationwide "Victory Horn Toot"--three short blasts followed by a long one, to warn less conscientious drivers exceeding the nation-wide thirty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit. Lehi's "Salvage for Victory" campaign scavenged scrap metal, rags,

tin cans, and other recyclable items.

Mayor Prior did not remain in office to see the end of World War II. On November 2, 1943, he was defeated by Republican George Lewis 413 to 254. Undaunted, Prior merely waited until the 1945 elections and campaigned again. His opponent was popular young merchant, John S. Broadbent. When the results were tabulated on 6 November 1945, Prior, and his running mates Carlos Coates, B.J. Lott, Alma Peterson, Glen Wanlass (councilmen); and Fern Johnson (treasurer) were announced winners.

No doubt the greatest legacy of Mayor Prior's local political career was the founding of the Lehi Civic Improvement Association (CIA), the organization which annually sponsors the Lehi Roundup Rodeo. A few months prior to America's entry into World War II, Mayor Prior and the city council, concerned about impending war-related community problems, created a volunteer organization committee to "foster, promote, and sponsor worthwhile activities that would be a community benefit." This CIA, was organized on February 20, 1941, with Alva H. Wing, president; Thomas Power, vice-president; J. Ferrin Gurney, secretary /treasurer; George A. Lewis, Roy A. West, and Daryl Fowler, directors. Articles of incorporation were filed on July 11, 1941.

From the beginning the CIA planned to sponsor one major Lehi celebration per year, and despite the threat of war, they began with enthusiasm the summer of 1941. The celebration, held 3-5 July was an overwhelming success and the CIA was able to repay the city the \$500 it had borrowed for the event. Since 1941, the CIA has either sponsored or contributed to a wide spectrum of community activities other than the annual celebration.

Mayor Prior, my high school Civics and American Problems teacher, was certainly one of Lehi's most civic-minded men. A native of Spanish Fork, the future mayor was born September 4, 1903 to Andrew and Emma Thomas Prior. After graduating from BYU in 1929, Prior married La Rue Boyack, and came to Lehi in 1930, the high school's new football coach. He occupied that position for

twenty-five years, also served as basketball coach, and initiated the wrestling program. For thirty-nine years, until his retirement in 1969, he served as a teacher of economics, social science, civics, history, and government.

Prior was truly a Lehi booster, one of the town's master spirits. He once announced that his sole interest in entering politics was because of a heart-felt obligation "to help and be of service to my community." He was a little more specific elsewhere when he acknowledged his long-term agenda to "put Lehi on the map." In addition to his three-term mayorship, he served as a long-term Lehi correspondent for the "Salt Lake Tribune", was president of the Lehi Lions Club, directed the Lehi Community Recreation department for fifteen years, served in the Utah State Legislature from 1965-66, and was an active member of the LDS Church. At the time of His January 9, 1971 death he was president of the Lehi Civic Improvement Association and had just been elected to a second term to the Utah State Legislature.

Governor Calvin Rampton eulogized Prior at this January 14, 1971, funeral services. A "Resolution of Condolence in Memoriam of Representative Dean Prior," read at his funeral, paid tribute to him for a lifetime of "loyal and devoted service." It was a fitting act for one of Lehi's most respected citizens of the day.