

Abel John Evans-Thirteenth Mayor of Lehi

By Richard Van Wagoner

Hon. Abel John Evans has left the impress of his individuality upon the material development, the political history and the moral progress of the state, he makes his home at Lehi, from which point he has exercised a considerable influence over public thought and opinion, while at the same time he has contributed in marked degree to the advancement of business interests and activities.

Abel John Evans born on December 20, 1852, was the first of our mayors to be born in Lehi. His parent Abel and Mary (Jones) Evans were Mormon emigrants from Wales. In 1865, after living in Lehi for thirteen years, serving as Lehi's marshal and counselor to Bishop David Evans, Abel returned to his native land as a missionary where he died the following year leaving three wives and sixteen children to mourn him.

Abel John, the eldest child, found it necessary to take the lead in family affairs. He obtained work where he could find it, mostly in local farming and stock-ranching activities. In 1874 he married Louisa Emeline Zimmerman. Together they became the parents of eleven children.

Evans was one of Lehi's prominent churchmen. Two years after returning from a mission to Great Britain, he was called to the High Council in the Utah Stake which included Lehi. He acted in that position until the Alpine Stake was organized on January 13, 1901, when he was made a member of the stake presidency, a position he served for more than twenty-seven years. When the Lehi Stake was organized on July 1, 1928, President Evans became the stake's first patriarch.

Abel John is best known for his political endeavors which began in 1881 when he served a seven-year stint as a Lehi City councilman and from 1885-88 when he was an alderman (justice of the peace). He was also the moving force

behind the establishment of local civil government classes, sponsored by the LDS Church's Mutual Improvement Association (M.I.A.) The first class, organized on 14 July 1888, studied the constitution, bylaws and Robert's Rules of Order in the old city hall on Main Street. Debates were conducted, mock trials held, and parliamentary procedures practiced.

Member of this class, many of whom went on to achieve prominence in business, law, government, and education circles were Alma Allred, Heber Allred, A. B. Anderson, James Brown, Abel John Evans,, Edwin Evans, George Evans, Israel Evans, Jr., Morgan Evans, Prime Evans, William Evans, William Goates, Abraham Gudmundsen, Isaac Gudmundsen, S.W. Ross, David Thurman, Hyrum Timothy, John S. Willes, L.B. Willes, David Winn, John Winn, and William H. Winn.

Abel John helped organize Lehi's second civil government class in the city hall in early 1891. Other members of this group included Alma Allred, P.H. Allred, W.F. Butt, G. H. Child, Al Davis, Prime Evans, and L.B. Willes. During the February 2, 1891 nominating caucus of the Lehi People's Party, held in the Meeting House, the young men of the civil government class put theory into practice and swept the ticket. William S. Evans, Joseph Goates, James B. Gaddis, Louis Garff, John Woodhouse, Oley Ellingson and Thomas Trane were chose city council members. Other new officers included: John E. Ross (Recorder), Edwin Goodwin (Marsal); John Roberts, Jr. (Treasurer) and Byron W. Brown (Justice).

The following year political enthusiasm reached an all-time high in town. To remove a principal obstacle to Utah Statehood (polygamy being the other), the Mormon Church abandoned the People's Party and encouraged Church members to divide along the national party lines. To conform with recently enacted legislation, the twenty-first election for Lehi city officers was held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.-- and the officers chosen were installed on the first of the year.

For the first time in both Utah and Lehi politics, the two national political

parties were vying for voter allegiance. Political rallies, street parades, torch light processions, and earsplitting drum corps were the order of the day for both the Republicans and Democrats. Re-elected Abel John Evans became the first Lehi mayor to win his seat by secret ballot in a two-party system, and the first Democrat to hold this office.

During Mayor Evans' term, Lehi exploded with economic development. The Utah Sugar factory's plant owned, provided a cash market and seasonal employment for most of the local farmers. The Lehi Commercial and Savings Bank was established, the Union Hotel opened, the Lehi Banner, our town's first published newspaper, came off the press, and U.S. President Benjamin Harrison stopped in town to visit the sugar works.

From 1892-96 Evans served on the Utah County Commission, While engaged in this work, as well as his farming and ranching, he was chosen a member of the Utah constitutional convention and played a prominent role in framing the organic law of the state. He served as a member of the state senate during the first, second, third, and fourth assemblies following the admission of State into the Union.

During this final session, when he was president of the senate, he achieve considerable fame by introducing what is know as the Evans Polygamy Bill which unsuccessfully attempted to nullify the unlawful cohabitation section of the Utah Criminal Code.

This measure, proposed after the Wilford Woodruff Manifesto had been issued, would have legalized polygamy under protection of Utah law. While the measure passed both state houses, it was eventually vetoed by Governor Heber M. Wells, who feared that Congress would enact a constitutional amendment prohibiting polygamy if Utah were to enact a favorable law allowing that practice once again.

Without a formal education--not a day spent in high school or law

school--Evans, fully self-educated, was admitted to the Utah Bar in 1901. A member of the “sagebrush democracy” movement, he contributed much to shaping the political history of Utah. In addition to serving as Lehi City attorney for nearly twenty years (his office was in the Lehi Commercial and Savings Bank), he was also legal advisor for numerous corporations, including the Alpine School Board, the People’s Co-op, the Provo Reservoir Company and the Utah Lake Irrigation Company.

He was a director of the Utah Lake Distributing Company, and a director and stockholder of the People’s Bank of Lehi, the Bank of American Fork, the Bank of Lehi, the Inter-Mountain Life Insurance Company of Salt Lake City, Provo Woolen Mills, and the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company. He was also one of the organizers and promoters of the Salt Lake and Utah Electric Railroad Company (the Orem Interurban).

In 1874, shortly after his marriage, Evans purchase a lot at the southeast corner of Second West and Fifth North. For two years he made his home on the site in a granary that was converted into a two-room dwelling. In 1876, he built an adobe residence, which the family occupied until 1900, when he erected the fine brick residence still standing at 482 North 200 West and owned by his grand-daughter Vervene S. Grant and her husband Myrten.

After a long and distinguished career, Abel John Evans died on December 8, 1939. His funeral was attended by an immense crowd which included such luminaries as LDS Church President Heber J. Grant, and Utah Governor Henry H. Blood who, in a letter of condolence to the family, wrote of Abel John:

He was a constant and conscientious churchman, patriotic citizen, a wise counselor and advocate of peace and good will. He will be missed throughout the state and beyond its borders where he was known for rugged honesty and devotion to duty. The people of Utah who had personal acquaintances with him mourn with you in his loss and extend condolences.