

Mayor John S. Willes-15th Mayor of Lehi

By Richard Van Wagoner

The single issue of the twenty-fourth municipal election was Prohibition. The position of the Democrats, led by mayor hopeful John S. Willes, was “that the sale of intoxicating liquor shall be prohibited in this city.” The Republican position was to pursue “a policy of high license and strict regulations.” The battle lines were drawn. “Prohibitionists press on!” a teetotaler exclaimed in the October 26, 1897 Banner, “and show by our ballots that we do not sell our honor for high licensed legitimate business.”

“PROHIBITION WINS” spouted the November 3, 1897 Banner. Democratic mayoralty candidate John S. Willes, and all his running mates except one, won by landslide margins. Serving with Mayor Willes were councilors Andrew A. Peterson, James Allred, Samuel Taylor, George H. Smith, and George Glover; recorder Edward Southwick; marshal Joseph A. Thomas; and treasurer Thomas F. Trane.

The most important accomplishment of the Willes administration was bringing electricity to Lehi. Although twenty-six kerosene lamps had been installed throughout the city in September 1890, during the administration of mayor Samuel Taylor, their light was dim and in windy weather the lamps often blew out.

In the spring of 1899 former Lehi resident Christian Garff approached the Lehi, American Fork, and Pleasant Grove city councils with a plan for providing all three towns with electricity. Garff’s proposal was accepted by the municipalities. The Utah County Light and Power Company was formed on August 2, 1899, and a hydroelectric plant was constructed at the mouth of American Fork Canyon. The long-awaited electric light made its first appearance in Lehi on the night of December 12, 1900.

While Lehi citizens were amiable to electricity they decided they did not like Prohibition. Two years was enough. In November 1899, every Republican, including mayor-elect Mosiah Evans, won by a lopsided margin. “Prohibition is now a thing of the past, “ editorialized the Banner, and the burden of paying a great amount of the city’s expense will fall upon the whiskey dealers, who for the past two years have not been compelled to pay one cent into the city treasury.”