

Mayor William Racker-Lehi's 20th Mayor 1911-1913

By Richard Van Wagoner

Lehi's thirty-first municipal election, held on November 7, 1911, pitted the incumbent mayor, Democrat Edward Southwick against Republican challenger William E. Racker, prominent local merchant. As on several previous occasions, the principal issue of the day was prohibition, a subject which seemed to bring out the vivisectionist on both sides of the political ticket.

Former Democratic Mayor Abel J. Evans, in a November 4 article in the "Lehi Banner" summarized Mayor Southwick's record:

We point with pride to the clean, energetic, and efficient administration given to the people of Lehi during the past two years by a Democratic Mayor and City Council, wherein the law has been vigorously, conscientiously, and justly enforced against all persons alike, and especially the carrying out, and the vigorous enforcement of the law against violators of the liquor ordinance, to the end, that the traffic in intoxicants has been induced to the minimum in so much that it is referred to by people generally as being the freest City from the sale of liquor in the State of Utah. And we pledge the nominees of the Democratic Convention, if elected, at the polls November 7, 1911, to a continuation of the earnest, conscientious, and persistent enforcement of the law in the future as in the past.

Local Republicans were irate. The prohibition law was county-wide, and all officials, regardless of their political affiliation were bound by oath to enforce it. Morgan Evans and William Asher, local Republican officials, blasted the Democratic platform.

"Well, why shouldn't they enforce a law made possible by a Republican Legislature," the two men attested. "Does it take any particular heroism to enforce an ordinance like this? Does not the Republican platform also declare in favor of a

vigorous, impartial enforcement of this same Prohibition Ordinance? Why, any party in power that did not enforce this law would be untrue to the trust imposed upon it. So why all these words, words?"

On election day all Republican candidates, except one, won election. Mayor Racker's supporting cast included: William F. Gurney, W. Karl Hopkins, Thomas Webb, Parley Austin, George G. Robinson (Councilors); James F. Fyffe (recorder) Ernest N. Webb (treasurer); and George Webb (justice).

Mayor Racker was born in Aarhus, Denmark, on January 23, 1853. After receiving his education in that country he emigrated to America when he was fifteen years old, arriving in Salt Lake City on September 25, 1868. He began life in Lehi as a field hand performing whatever menial work he could find. Bishop David Evans, his father-in-law, appointed him to a clerkship in the local tithing office, a position he held for seven years. Resigning from his clerking, Racker accepted a position as bookkeeper with the People's Co-operative Institution. He was eventually advanced to the position of secretary and treasurer of that organization, a position he held for ten years.

The April 29, 1893, Thomas Cutler resigned as superintendent of the People's Co-op. Racker, who had been serving as assistant superintendent for some time, was selected to be Cutler's successor. Prosperity of Lehi's largest mercantile continued under Racker's management. The December 28, 1893, "Lehi Banner" extensively detailed the business of the uptown Co-op at the end of Racker's first year of management. The firm was stocked with \$75,000 worth of goods. twenty clerks were employed and the previous Saturday's sales were reported as \$1,500.

In 1899, the People's Co-op capitalization was increased to \$100,000 of which \$60,000 was fully paid. In the first two years of the new century Racker supervised dramatic expansions of both the uptown and downtown stores. In the spring of 1900, the original downtown building (T&W Taylor/Lehi Union Exchange) was demolished and a large two-story brick facility started. This

building (presently the west half of the Colonial House) at 189 West Main was completed in early 1901.

In 1902, the Co-op management initiated construction of a 22,000-square-foot building at the uptown site (161 East State). This structure (Christensen's today) was completed in the spring of 1903. It was one of the first stores in Lehi to be wired for electricity. The 4 June 1903 "Lehi Banner" commented that it was a pleasure to do business there because there were "no dark corners." The building was also the first in Lehi to have cement sidewalks. "This is something new in our city," commented the April 9, 1903 "Lehi Banner", "and we hope to see our merchants on Main Street soon do likewise and help make our city look more metropolitan."

W.E. Racker was called on a mission to Denmark in early 1903. A festive retirement party was held on his behalf in the Union Hotel. After dinner Co-Op president Thomas Cutler presented Racker with a \$240 gold watch. Samuel I Goodwin, who was succeeding Racker, then gave a speech praising his predecessor's management style. When Racker returned from his mission in the summer of 1904 he purchased the downtown Co-op branch. This \$9,000 transaction included the lumberyard and all the building in the 108 foot frontage--but none of the store goods.

Racker Mercantile, well-stocked with general merchandise, opened on August 6. In 1912 Racker demolished the older, eastern portion of his store (181 West Main) and built a new addition. When this was completed in November its shelves were stocked with dry goods, shoes, hats and gents furnishings. The western half of the 1900-built building (189 West Main) became the hardware and paint departments; the grocery department was established in the eastern portion.

Though the firm's original lumber and coal yard was at the north west corner of Main and Center, this was later moved to the southwest corner of Main and Second West. On January 1, 1916, Racker sold his lumber and coal interests to R.J. Whipple, who later moved the business south of the Orem Interurban Depot.

(southwest corner of Second West and Third North). The only remnant of the old racker lumber and coal yards today is the large 1915-built cement warehouse just west of Western Tack and Togs. This is presently owned by Holbrook Farms and is used to store large equipment.

As soon as the cement warehouse was under construction in 1915, Racker began a three-section business block on the site of the old Anders Peterson home (24-36 West Main). This new structure, fifty-six feet wide and sixty feet long, was divided into compartment--two were eighteen feet wide and the third was twenty feet. The Racker Block today houses Peacock Studios, Alpine Printing, and Porter's Place.

Other Racker business interests included the Utah Sugar Company, Lehi Commercial and Savings Bank, Utah County Light and Power Company, the Union Hotel, and the State Bank of Lehi.

When merchant Racker turned seventy years old on January 23, 1922, he retired from the mercantile business where he had labored for forty years. Under the ownership of his sons Jacob E. and Leonard D. Racker, Racker Mercantile was divided into two stores. The east building (181 West Main) became J.E. Racker Mercantile (dry goods, furnishings and shoe departments). Leonard Racker established the Winchester Store (grocery and hardware department in the west building).

During Mayor Racker's administration, the City Council divided the city into paving districts and developed the first paved sidewalk in town. Another important enterprise established in Lehi during 1913 is a faint memory in the town's history. Talk of an electric railroad had been heard as early as 1902. But it was not until March 1913 that the Salt Lake and Utah Electric Railroad (the Orem Interurban) came through town. A depot was built on the southwest corner of Third North at First West. Thousands of passengers and countless tons of freight were hauled on the line until it was dissolved in 1946.

Another historic event during mayor Racker's administration was the August 1913 release of the "History of Lehi" by the Lehi Pioneer Committee consisting of William S. Evans, Andrew Fjeld, George N. Child, Hamilton Gardner, Martin B. Bushman, and Andrew B. Anderson.

Lehi citizens had not only a new history to read, but a new place to dance. Halloween night 1913 was a festive occasion; the Smuin Dancing Academy held its grand opening then. The huge hall at the northwest corner of center and Second North had a forty-eight-by-ninety-two-foot spring floor which could accommodate hundreds of dancers. And dance they did. Until the building was converted into an apartment building in 1949, scores of couples froliced there weekly to the dance bands of the day. The facility also served for eight years as the Lehi High School gymnasium, housing many school dances and basketball games. It is the Abbingdon Manor today.

Mayor Racker, after a distinguished career that benefited Lehi citizens greatly, died on May 22, 1925, just three years after his retirement.