

Lehi's Thurman School
Lehi Yesteryear
By Richard Van Wagoner

“School has been stopped for almost four months because a new school building is being erected, wrote Elise Amalie Waerenkskjold, a Norwegian immigrant living in Texas in 1865. “It takes a very long time to complete it. God only knows knows our husbands could be so indifferent toward a project which is of so very great importance to our children. In a society where the spirit of cooperation is lacking, nothing can thrive and prosper.”

Unlike this description of frontier Texas, the “spirit of cooperation” thrived in early Lehi. Schooled in the communal teachings of Mormonism, citizens prided themselves on dedication to the group. Educating children--”Utah’s Best Crop,” as the saying went--was of prime importance in Mormon communities.

In 1851, while simultaneously building their log cabins on the banks of Dry Creek near Fifth West and Third North, settlers of Evansville (as it was then called) had erected an eighteen-by - twenty-four-foot school of cottonwood logs which had been felled further upstream. Gaps between the rough logs were chinked with pieces of wood and daubed with clay. The building’s roof, which leaked in wet weather, consisted of willows plastered with mud.

Long-time Lehi educator A.B. Anderson wrote that in the fall of 1851 “when the building was ready for use a great gathering brought the bounties of the times and made the house warming long to be remembered. The little school house made it possible for the people to meet together on the same equality, share each others joys and sorrows and as members of the same great family united in the same great cause.”

One-room school houses like Lehi’s--the scene of hundreds of recitations, compositions, and spelling bees--were the backbone of the American education system in the nineteenth century. Most pioneer teachers were young, dedicated, and poorly paid. Few had formal training--often it was sufficient that they knew how to read. James Kirkham, who was hired as an assistant teacher in the Southwest School, noted in his December 11, 1869 diary that his

examination consisted of “a reading in the bible and an example in fractions.”

The Log School, the first public building in Lehi, served a variety of community functions for nearly twenty years. Its walls resounded with the activities of religious assemblies, city council meetings, elections, dances, and theatrical productions.

On February 17, 1854, the city council passed an ordinance which created the Lehi School District. Three trustees were empowered to assess and collect taxes for establishing and maintaining schools. Three days later when elections were held in the Log School, Preston Thomas, Daniel Collett, and Williams Burgess became the town’s first school board.

By 1857, the Log School could no longer accommodate all students who wished to attend class. The Tithing Office, which had been built during the summer of 1854 at approximately 344 West Main, served for a time as a classroom for teacher Martha Winn. Sometime in 1857 or 1858 construction of the Ward Meeting House has progressed to a point where the upper story could be used for schoolwork. C.D. Evans, in a letter published in the October 20, 1860 “Deseret News,” noted that “in the city of Lehi, an excellent tabernacle has been completed, situated over which is a commodous and well finished school room.”

The Log School continued to be used for educational and other functions as late as 1864 when it was noted that the city council occasionally met in the building.

Although both the Log School and the Meeting House school room were being used in the fall of 1860, more classroom space was needed. In 1863, school trustees Daniel S. Thomas, Canute Peterson, and Thomas Karren proceeded with construction of a new school building a few feet west of the Meeting House. On March 25, the trustees petitioned the city council for surplus wheat in the city treasury. Thirty bushels were loaned and a sixty-on-foot-long adobe building subsequently called the “Southwest School” was completed for a city council meeting on January 2, 1864.

Mr. Loud was the first teacher in this school. He was succeeded first by William Sergant and later by William Thurmond, his brothers Samuel and David, and J. Edgar Ross. During the school year of 1872 the old adobe city hall on Main Street, between First and Second West, served as a temporary overflow for growing school needs.

The Southwest School, which in 1898 had been officially renamed the Thurman School,

in honor of the Thurman family of educators, was renovated into a ward amusement hall in 1915 because of its close proximity to the Meeting House. The partition dividing the building into two rooms was removed and a maple floor laid. A musician's stand was erected in one end, and the \$600 project became primarily used as a dance hall.

In 1937, the Meeting House and the Thurman School were merged and incorporated into a single structure, to be used by the Lehi First Ward. When completed the modification was not without its problems. There was no inner door linking the former Meeting House and Thurman School so anyone wanting to go from one part of the building to the other had to walk outside. The situation was not remedied until 1949.

In 1972, the entire First Ward building, including the old Meeting House and Thurman School portions, was demolished. A new \$361,000 Lehi First/Sixth Ward Chapel was completed on this site under the supervision of Bishops George F. Tripp and Sherwin R. Allred. The precise site of the old Thurman School is the west portion of the parking lot immediately north of the present First/Sixth Ward building.