

# Virgil Peterson

## By Richard Van Wagoner

Every age produces a few exceptional individuals, men and women whose lives are remembered by large numbers of people, generations after they are gone. Virgil Hyrum Peterson who died on August 1st was one of those renaissance men whose obituary could never do justice to his long and well-lived life. At age ninety-eight he was Lehi's oldest man when he moved up another step. But despite his well-earned rest, I miss his friendship, his solid advice and his gentlemanly manner. And I mourn his death and all that was lost with him.

Virgil was born on December 13, 1894, although the December 20th "Lehi Banner" reported that he was born on "Wednesday, Dec. 12." Grover Cleveland was president of the United States then and Utah was yet two years away from statehood. The Mormon church was still struggling with polygamy under Wilford Woodruff's direction and the Salt Lake Temple had only been dedicated the previous year.

The Wright brothers were nearly a decade away from making their epic flight and it would be twenty years before many cars were seen on Lehi streets. Airplanes, telephone, television, space shots, moon walks, probes to distant planets all were developed or happened during Virgil's lifetime.

He always rooted for the underdog. That was why he so proudly proclaimed himself a life-long Democrat in a vast sea of Republicanism. He converted my mother to his political philosophy and she always supported his interests.

On one election day he was at the polls when Jack Turner, an amputee came to vote. Jack asked Virgil to come into the booth to help him stand while he cast his ballot. The judges of election who had Republican leanings, said no! And he did. But he always wondered if they counted Jack's vote.

Although no one appointed him to the job, Virgil was the designated funeral preacher for nearly all non-Mormon or Jack-Mormon requiems in town. "I have always been kind of friendly with everybody," he told me. And during his lifetime, according to his own count, he spoke at over 800

funerals, most of them that died in Lehi.” And he added that his wife Leota, who had a beautiful alto voice, sang at more than 500 memorial services.

To those of us who remember Virgil as a powerful and knowledgeable expounder of the gospel, it seems rather unbelievable that he was once a young lad with a great fear of public speaking. But he told me the first time he blessed the sacrament as a young priest in the old Lehi Meeting House, “that was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in this church, or any where. I was so sensitive, I guess, self-conscious, that I could hardly talk....My partner was Dennis Schow...he was my same age, well he just laughed when I got through...because I had such a hard time.”

He told me that when he was growing up the bishop would call on someone from the audience to preach the sermon during Sacrament Meeting. No advance warning was given, no notes were prepared, it was just “you and the Lord,” he said. Some of those old wise men of his day could speak for hours in this manner. “When I get old, I’d like to be able to do that,” Virgil thought to himself. But he was a backward boy,” as he put it. “Before I went on a mission, I never even offered to answer a question in my schoolwork. I knew the answers, but I never offered to (give them)...I had to take the ground one inch at a time.”

When he was twenty-one he left for a mission in Minnesota where it was so cold in the wintertime that his work was restricted to apartment buildings to prevent freezing. World War I was in full blast then so his mission was extended to 26 ½ months traveling without purse or scrip in the summertime yet always staying in “big homes and good beds.”

There, in that bone-chilling north country he was forced to conduct meetings, to speak to strangers on street corners. “If I had big crowds, “ he recalled, “that’s how I (learned to) speak to a crowd.” And that was the beginning of the fulfillment of his dream to speak without notes for at least one hour. Those of us who heard him speak so often can testify that he was indeed a master extemporaneous speaker.

One of my favorite stories reflecting Virgil’s religious service was his calling as bishop of the Lehi 5th Ward. He was riding a horse past Abel John Evans’ home when the Alpine Stake presidency member stopped him. “Your name was presented for Bishop ,“ he announced to the thirty-two year old farmer. You’ve been passed, but we haven’t get the okay from the First Presidency yet. As soon

as we get it, we'll have you ordained." Virgil was astounded. "I nearly fainted," he remembered. Bishop Andrew Fjeld, who he was replacing, was his father's best friend, an aged with many years of church service.

The responsibilities on the new Bishop Peterson's shoulder were immense and he wondered if he was up to the expectations. The ward had a core element of three powerful, older men: Bishop James Gardner, J.W. Wing, and Jonas Holdsworth. Those men wanted the 5th ward to buy the Lehi Tabernacle for a ward meeting house. Virgil wanted to build a new church.

He went to the stake president and said, "I have got a problem that I can't handle, I don't think. I am just young, and the Tabernacle is for sale, and Bishop Fjeld bought a lot. He bought the lot to build a new church. I think most people want to build a new church. The Tabernacle is too big for us to keep up, and too big to keep heated. So what can I do? When it's brought up, if them fellows get out and do a little work, I'll lose the vote."

President Stephen Chipman's advice was to refrain from saying anything to anyone, including his counselors. Immediately after sacrament services he was to stand and say "now, we have two propositions, one is to buy the Tabernacle, which is too expensive and big, and one is to build a new building. Now, I don't want you to talk to each other, I want you to vote on your own mind...I want you to vote the way that you feel. Now all who want a new church on the lot, please stand up." About seventy people stood. "Now all of you who want to buy the tabernacle stand up," he repeated. Seven men, including the powerful trio arose. Bishop Peterson then said, "well, evidently most of you want the new building." To Virgil's relief, Bishop James Gardner said, "I make a motion that we make it unanimous and build a new building." And that is how we got the old Fifth Ward Meeting House.

When I began my research for "Lehi: Portraits of a Utah Town", Virgil was my principal source of oral history. I tape recorded dozens of hours of his reminiscences, questioning him on virtually every aspect of Lehi History. His memory was phenomenal, his knowledge unsurpassed. I was prompted to say to him one day, "Virgil, when you die it will be like the burning down of a library filled with one-of-a-kind books." I feel that even more so now that he is not with us.

But he left the community and his family with a legacy of honesty, integrity, and good works. Aside from his serving as bishop of the Fifth Ward he also worked in the Lehi Stake Presidency for

nineteen years. He was an influential member of the Sons of Utah Pioneers and an officer in the Mormon Battalion Organization. Through his efforts the monument marking the site of the Lehi Meeting House was erected.

He was a farmer, loved the soil, and changing weather patterns. Growing sugar beets was a life-long passion. He was a self-educated professor of beet sugar culture and served a term as President of the Utah State Beet Growers Association. I recall him telling me that once he went with a daughter to a health food store and the proprietor began lecturing them against the evils of white sugar. “Young man, “ virgil countered, “do you think the Lord would inspire his prophet Wilford Woodruff to build the Lehi Sugar Factory is white sugar was poisonous?” I have forgotten what the shopkeeper’s response was, but I am sure he thought a moment before replying.

The volume of Virgil’s civic work was legendary, a record that like his funeral preaching, will perhaps never be surpassed in our community. He was a Lehi City Councilman, a State Legislator for one term, a director and president of the Lehi Irrigation Company, served on the Lehi City Planning Board, Utah County Planning and Farm Security Board, and chairman of the War Ration Board during World War II, for which he received two presidential citations. A long-term supporter of the Hutchings Museum, he served on the board and raised a considerable amount of money for the organization through annual community carnivals.

His life long creed was: faithful service, moral honest, and religious devotion. He left some advice on one of my tapes that can benefit the entire community. I am sure he wouldn’t mind my sharing with you this tribute to the generosity of his soul; it captures his essence as a true Christian. “We have lost a little bit of neighborliness, and care for our fellow man you know...but anything that’ll symbolize the thinking of the people of the community, or a ward, is a good thing. It’s a good thing, it brings people closer together. If you want to love somebody, do something for them.”