

LEHI SUGAR FACTORY

By Charles Greenland

Since Highland farmers grew many acres of sugar beets for the Lehi factory, beginning in 1891, here are a few facts about the factory.

It was the first sugar-beet factory in the Mountain West, the first to utilize beets grown by irrigation, the first to use American-made machinery, the first to build auxiliary cutting stations and the first to have been established as part of a great social and religious movement. From the beginning, the Utah sugar industry was an LDS Church enterprise. Without the financial backing and support of the Church, the sugar industry would not have been established in Utah.

In the late 1840's Apostle John Taylor toured a sugar factory near Paris, France and was convinced that the same process could be successful in Utah. He bought 1200 lb of seed and \$12,000 worth of machinery and shipped it to Utah where they built a factory in Sugarhouse but it produced only a thick, brown syrup that was inedible, even to livestock.

The first successful production of sugar from white sugar beets was in 1879 in Alvarado, California. In Utah, Arthur Stayner produced 7,000 lb of brown sorghum sugar in a plant in Spanish Fork in 1887. As a result he visited another sorghum sugar mill and the beet sugar mill in Alvarado and decided that beet sugar was the best option. Stayner solicited the support of LDS and other leaders and in 1889 a letter was circulated seeking financial investment in the beet sugar business and in September, 1889 the Utah Sugar Company was incorporated.

The decision of where the plant was to be built was preceded by a lively competition among cities and the final choice was between American Fork and Lehi. Lehi's proposal included a 35 acre building site on Mulliner's Mill Pond, a \$1000 donation to purchase additional land, perpetual water rights to the Mill Pond, 80 acres of limestone quarry at Pelican Point, 1500 acres of ground for a company beet farm and \$1000 worth of labor to improve the road to the factory site. The Rio Grande Western RR went right through the property and the Union Pacific line was less than a mile away so the Lehi site was chosen. American Fork citizens were very upset and, as one historian wrote: "a literal social feud existed between the two towns for a long time because of this regrettable incident".

The groundbreaking for the factory was held on November 20, 1890 and the cornerstone laying on December 26, 1890 was the biggest event in Lehi's history. The machinery was purchased from the same company that had built the plant in Alvarado, CA but capital to make the payments was hard to come by. Eventually the church paid \$50,000 from the tithing funds, borrowed \$150,000 from Salt Lake City banks and signed a note with 20 other Mormon capitalists for another \$100,000. Another \$200,000 was raised from 700 stockholders. The machinery, worth more than \$260,000, was delivered on more than 100 train cars and some of the large pieces, weighing over 20 tons, had to be cut down to pass through tunnels en route.

In early 1891, field representatives began visiting farmers to convince them to plant sugar beets. At that time an acre of ground could produce about \$20 in wheat, \$13 in hay or \$36 in potatoes. The farmers were given an estimate of \$45 per acre to raise beets, so 556 farmers, from Farmington to Gunnison, contracted to raise 1500 acres of beets.

What is the Highland connection? George Austin, the Sugar Company field man, planted the very first seed for the plant, in Highland, on a farm owned by George Comer on the NE corner of 9600 N and 6800 W, where the LDS Highland South Stake building is now located. For many years thereafter there were hundreds of acres of beets planted in Highland, not just for the Lehi plant but for the West Jordan plant after the Lehi one closed in 1925. (The West Jordan plant had begun operation in 1916.) The sugar factories not only provided income for the farmers who raised the beets but hundreds of men

of all ages-many from Highland-worked each fall/winter for 2-3 months during the “campaign” when the beets were processed.

During its lifetime the Lehi plant processed over 2.5 million tons (5 billion pounds) of beets, extracting almost 7 million 100-lb bags of sugar.

In 1939 the buildings were sold and many were torn down and moved elsewhere. Much of the brick from the main factory was used to build the Joseph Smith Memorial building on the BYU campus and the Lehi First Ward chapel. The 184 foot smokestack and a building built in 1914 are all that remain of the factory today.



Lehi Sugar Factory 1905



Lehi Sugar Factory 2017