
Lester Farnsworth Wire: ***“Savior of the Highways”***



By: Edith Wire (*sister*)

c. 1963-1964

Lester Farnsworth Wire was born on September 3, 1887, and died April 14, 1958. He remained a bachelor. He was the son of Franklin Charles Wire and Lida Farnsworth. He invented the electric traffic light at the age of 24. He was the eldest of four children, preceding three sisters, two of whom died in childhood of diphtheria during that dreadful national epidemic in the winter of 1896-1897 when whole families succumbed. Lester's father was partner of the Davis County Nursery with headquarters at Roy, Utah, and was away from home on business most of the time.

Lester attended Salt Lake High School, later called West High School. He also attended East Denver High School in 1906-1907. He was active in sports and held all the positions in football—a complete football star. He was a member of the National Guard. He held the Utah State Championship for marksmanship for 2 years, 1910 and 1911, receiving a bronze and a gold medal. He had medals for Rapid Fire, Pistol Expert, Rifle Expert and others. He was also Western States Champion from 1907 through 1909 and had medals given by the 15th Infantry at Fort Douglas, Utah. He was also sent to Camp Perry to represent the state of Utah in marksmanship.

He organized the first high school boys' basketball team and the first high school girls' basketball team in Salt Lake City. He graduated from Salt Lake High School with honors in 1909, and was appointed to the West Point Military Academy by Senator Reed E. Smoot of Utah. The young man who had been appointed prior to Lester failed his examinations and was sent home in disgrace. He left a note saying he was unable to bear the humiliation or face his family, and he jumped from the speeding train as it neared Utah.

It was the rule not to permit another appointee from any state where the former one had failed or had been disgraced until a certain time had elapsed. Consequently, Lester's appointment had to be canceled, much to his disappointment, so he attended the University of Utah to study law. It was expensive, and after one term, he decided to get a job and work his way through college.

He knew and admired Chief Barlow of the Police Department, who had become chief in 1909. The admiration was mutual as Lester, although so young, was a noted and outstanding athlete and marksman. Lester was tall, strong, and handsome, being 6'1" tall and weighing 185 pounds. He had expressive hazel eyes. He joined the police force February 21, 1910. There were no grades or classes of patrolmen in those days.

The police station then was in the city council hall, 120 East First South. Earlier it had been called Territorial House, and still earlier, the Territorial Prison. A half century later it had

to give way to progress, and the city tore it down and rebuilt it stone by stone across from the State Capitol Building, where it is now a museum.

The phone number for the police station was Wasatch 128 and for the Detective Bureau, Wasatch 8. At that time, it still had the board sidewalk in front instead of concrete pavement. The boards were only in front of the police station, the rest was dirt, with mud puddles in the winter.

The salary was \$50 per month. It was no job for a young man of twenty-two with Lester's tender, sympathetic disposition. He was called the kid policeman or "the kid." He saw many pitiful conditions and was always ready to help. He was a lovable person, tender hearted and would help or loan money which could never be repaid. He would help others first and promise himself to start saving for college "next month." He loved people and always thought of himself last.

Model-T Fords were beginning to make their appearance. They were a novelty which people said would soon pass. Of course, dear "old Dobbin" and the "old gray mare" would never be replaced by this new-fangled contraption.

At first there were only four in the state. The Ralph Bristol's in Ogden owned the first one. It made such a noise it could be heard coming a block away and people would leave their work to go outdoors to watch it pass. Mrs. Bristol gayly waved her handkerchief to them all. The first Model T had two seats. Four or five years later they also produced automobiles with one seat, which they called Runabouts.

Crime then, as since, was a problem, and there were several policemen killed. It was said that, "The silver badge on his left breast was a target."

In 1911, six bicycle police and two motorcycle police were added to the force. The motorcycle police were Dan Grundvig and Henry Potter. The general force was increased to eighty-two. Heinie Potter, a warm friend of Lester, was killed in a motorcycle race at Wandamere Park before hundreds of spectators. Lester wept on reading the headlines the next morning. He was on-shift so did not see it, but he had warned Heinie not to race as he was not feeling well. Motorcycle racing was a popular sport both at Wandamere Park and the Salt Palace.

In 1912, the city council-type of government was established. "Civil Service" had not come in and policemen were in and out of a job, depending on the political party then in power. The new chief immediately reorganized the force and removed the older and wiser men of experience who had forgotten more about police work than he would ever know. They were key men not easily replaced, but he saw his mistake too late. Patrolmen were graded into three

classes. Lester was asked to form some kind of traffic department to control the ever-increasing confusion in the city's streets.

There had never been a traffic department. In the past, there had never been a need of it. So, Lester, now at the age of twenty-four, although still walking a beat, which he continued to do, started also to organize a traffic detail.

The town was growing—slowly—but it was growing into a city. Although the horse and buggy were still the favorite way of travel, there were streetcars or trolley cars with the trolley touching the wires overhead. The light wire poles had only been removed from the center of Main Street in 1906. The streets were still dirt, often muddy, or recently laid with cobblestones.

It is well to pause now and then and link past and present in contemplation and realize how much the present owes to the past. As there never had been any traffic detail or regulations, everyone was at liberty to do anything he pleased at any time. The streetcars stopped in the middle of the block, as well as on each corner, making three stops on every block.

When Lester asked that streetcars stop at only one corner and stopping in the middle of the block be discontinued, there were complaints from the merchants, saying that it was ruining their business. Streetcar riders also complained over the inconvenience of walking a half block or less. Horses and buggies on each side of the street would be going in the same direction, at the same time. Hitching posts were in front of every store and horses' drinking troughs were on all the corners. If one decided he wanted to be on the other side of the street, he crossed over any place. If one wished to cut "kitty corner" from one to the other corner through the intersection, he did so. If one driving a horse and buggy decided to turn around and go in the opposite direction at any time or place, he abruptly did so, regardless of whether he was inconveniencing someone. This in itself caused enough confusion.

Every merchant and grocer had their own delivery wagon, horse, driver and delivery boy. No lady ever carried a package. They had gloves, hosiery or any small package delivered. But once, when a woman ordered a spool of thread delivered, the merchant was so annoyed and amused he ordered a large dray to deliver it. When the dray with its two large horses drove to her door and two husky men carried in her little spool of thread, she was a bit chagrined.

There were all kinds of vehicles: small, big, with one, two or four horses, ice wagons, drays, moving vans, all with horses. Pedestrians crossing the street had to look every way or be stepped on or nosed by a horse, or have their hats knocked off by a horse. They were the 'good old horse-and-buggy days.'

People were slowly beginning to get rid of their horses and get the Model-T Ford or Fliver. (In 1925, they began to be called classic automobiles.) A few more families now owned automobiles or autos, which complicated things still more. Fords had to be cranked to make them go, and many an arm or leg was broken by the crank whirling back. If they were a novelty to people, they were strange and terrifying to the horses with their awful chugging noise, steam spurting up, and funny sounding horns. The horses would shy, rear, and often there would be a runaway. The dreaded runaways became common. Often the buggy tipped over and the occupants were hurt or killed.

Neither automobiles nor buggies would stop for a streetcar or for a passenger alighting. They often splashed them with mud or even knocked the alighting passenger down, sometimes even killing them. Sometimes the passenger refused to alight until a vehicle or automobile had passed, thus delaying the streetcar.

Which driver would give in to the other—the one driving the horse or the one driving the automobile? Neither one would. There were arguments and accidents. There was no right of way to yield. Lester would laugh and say, “If you ever want to see a nervous woman crossing the street, just watch Ma.” Yes, “Ma” was his pet name for his mother. She would laugh and reply, “I am not the only nervous person. They are all looking around. It isn’t safe to go uptown anymore. One needs eyes in the back of their head as well as the front.”

Even in the days of Julius Caesar there were traffic problems. Chariots and horses, ox- and mule-drawn wagons were forbidden to enter Rome during trading hours.

Although Lester still walked a beat as a patrolman, he was appointed head of the traffic detail at the age of twenty-four and was supposed to untangle this snarl and confusion. He organized and wrote the city’s first traffic rules and regulations. They were a novelty and people shrugged them off, although agreeing that things were pretty bad and “something should be done about it.” Of course, it was always “the other person’s fault.” Some of the more progressive citizens thought it was a good idea and people should pay a little attention to it.

Oddly enough, the city was to remain divided over it for many years. Salt Lake has always had such a hard time growing up. The traffic rules and regulations which Lester made at that time were not changed for forty years and were adopted by San Francisco and other cities.

Lester was a little discouraged and he said to mother, “People just don’t cooperate. They still want the town to look and act like it did when it was a village. Some of them would still like to see the cows going down Main Street. I don’t know what to do. I just don’t know what to do.”

Mother, who was a deeply religious and spiritual woman, would comfort him by saying, “Don’t worry about it. You’ll think of something—and it will be the right thing, too! I just know it will. God will give you the light, and when he does, the Bible says, “Don’t hide your light under a bushel, but put it up where it may be seen by all.’ Lester was also a deeply religious and spiritual person and depended greatly on mother’s prayers as well as his own. He was a great reader of the Bible, especially the Psalms. We all studied the Bible daily.

Up to that time, there had been no policeman watching at the intersections. If the tangles and arguments became too bad, the policeman on the beat went out and attempted to maintain order.

Lester appointed Earnest Lesser to be the first traffic policeman. He stood at Second South and Main Street. He later appointed Martin D. McGuinness, who stood at First South and Main Street. This was for the better regulation of street traffic and pedestrians using the crossings. They stood in the intersection facing east or west, which let the traffic go north and south, then turned facing north or south to let the traffic go east and west. They stood in a little square left by the streetcar tracks. They kept their watch in hand as there were no wristwatches at that time and were very fair in timing, but of course, there were complaints. Some said they showed partiality in letting traffic go one way while they kept traffic waiting the other way. Some people are never happy unless they are complaining!

Some of the drivers were smart alecks even to the point of meanness. They drove as close to the policemen as they could to see if they could make them get out of the way. One even made his horse gallop toward Earnie Lesser, who had to jump aside to save himself. Mother and I saw that ourselves. Yes, Salt Lake has had a hard time growing up.

At first the traffic squad was only on during the days from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. There were now two eight-hour shifts at the corners mentioned. Traffic at night was not heavy enough to need a shift. They were out in all kinds of weather, wintry blizzards with snow getting heavy on their hats and shoulders and piling up around their feet, out in driving rains and cutting winds. They were not as fortunate as they had been as patrolmen on the beat where they could occasionally stand in the doorway, or go into a coffee and doughnut shop or restaurant for a few minutes. They were out there for eight hours with their arms outstretched or motioning traffic with only a short time off for lunch when their relief came.

Lester felt sorry for his men. People’s comfort was always his foremost concern. He really loved people—all of them. When it was time for their lunch he would often relieve them himself, so he knew all their discomforts. He always showed his love of God, forgetfulness of self and love for mankind. He was at work before seven in the morning, came home for dinner at six, and returned uptown to finish with his men at eleven. They put in their eight hours, but

Lester put in sixteen hours every day without any extra pay. There was no overtime pay in those days. If extra work was given it was gratis. He was never a clock watcher, never thought of stopping when his eight-hour shift was finished, but was often busy “catting around” to see what bums were in town that should be given a floater or put in the “can.”

A job those days was a serious thing. They did not have a lunch hour. Their time for lunch was twenty minutes or less, just what it took to eat a quick lunch. There were no morning or afternoon coffee breaks or rest periods, or time-and-a-half or overtime pay. Those things came years later, after the Depression with F.D. Roosevelt’s Santa Claus program in 1930. There were no relief programs. The country was in no way Socialist. People were proud and dependable, and anxious to make an honest dollar. They did not want or accept charity, unless they were deliberately beggars. If they only had a crust, the neighbors never knew. That was the way American pride used to be.

Lester would say, “There must be some way to help my men. You have no idea how hard and tiresome it is standing out there in all kinds of weather with arms outstretched or motioning traffic. Some people are so ignorant and impudent one would like to knock their block off or spit in their eye. There must be something I can do if I could only think of it.”

“You will,” mother would comfort him.

He thought of her words, “Someday you will get the light, and when you do, the Bible says not to hide it under a bushel, but to put it up where it may be seen by all.” He came across the verse in the Bible, “No one lights a lamp then hides it under a bushel, but it is put on a lamp post to give light to all. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick and it giveth light to all that are in the house. So, let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and praise your Father who is in Heaven.” Mother’s words were an inspiration to Lester, and he started working on that idea—a light to all.

He began studying it out—a light on a pole, a box or a lantern. Power could come from the trolley wire overhead. There would have to be a change of lights. He watched his kid sister, as he called me, coloring some Christmas programs for school red and green. Yes, that was it: red to stop and green to go. When he told us, mother said, “I told you you’d get an idea and it would be the right one!”

Lester told Chief Grant about his idea. He replied, “Don’t waste your time like that. It is not practical, my boy, not practical. It won’t work.”

“I think it will,” replied Lester. But the chief shrugged and said, “You had better go along as you have been. That is plenty good enough. You are doing a fine job.”

Lester was disappointed, but, being a determined young man, he told us, "I am going to have it yet!" He was very meticulous in all he did. He thought everything out well and calmly, and after his mind was made up, that was final!

He went to the Consolidated Wagon and Machine Co., formerly John Deere Plough Co., at 140 South State Street, and told them what he wanted. George T. Odell, the general manager, gave him a large wooden box or crate such as were used for packing and crating those days. They were made of alder or oak wood. A carton box was unheard of. They were not yet in existence.

Lester, who had studied and thought everything out very thoroughly, invented, drew plans for, and personally supervised every tiny detail of its construction. Someone at the Consolidated Wagon Co. cut the heavy crate, which was one inch thick, to his desired dimensions. It was fastened with twelve heavy brass screws, one inch wide, instead of nails, so it would not warp as a result of the weather changes. It must be in box form. There must be two circular openings on each side.

The box must be 20 inches square, 18 ½ inches high to the peak, with a slanted roof for rain or snow to slide off, with an eave or overlap of 2 ¼ inches. The roof must have a long piano hinge at the top so that one side could be raised to repair the mechanism inside. The roof was 24" wide and stayed down with its own weight. The circular openings, 6" in diameter, were above and below each other. There was a removable layer to separate the top and bottom. There were two red globes above and the green globes were below, alternating with two green lights up and two red lights down.

It must be on a sturdy post, 4x4", so that it could be seen. The post was 5' 2 ¼" high, centered on a wooden platform so that it would be secure. The post was square and placed in a square hole. The platform was 1' high and 3' square so it could fit in the intersection.

The Edison "Mazda lamp" had recently replaced the tungsten or carbon light. There were no colored globes in those days so Lester used the household "Mazda lamp" which everybody had. They were clear glass with a point on the tip. They were called "tear-drop" globes. (Swans Commercial Lamps have no record of colored globes. *The Encyclopedia* by General Lighting. *The Electric Lamp Industry* by Art A. Bright Jr., no colored globes.) He dipped them in red or green paint or dye to get the coloring. These were the very first colored globes. Somebody eventually took the idea and started manufacturing them. He did not have them patented and someone made a fortune from them. There were no colored globes on the market until 1914.

I, at the age of twelve, said, "They are the Christmas colors."

"That is right," Lester replied, "holly and berries."

“Yes, that is right,” said mother. “Holly is an evergreen, the symbol of eternity, and the holly wreath or circle is also a symbol of eternity. I know your idea will live on and on.”

He started with the 60-watt globe, but gradually increased it up to the 100-watt globe. He decided to have a little trimming or gingerbread around the roof and asked for our suggestions. I suggested the double Greek key, but the next day he said he had decided on a scroll, a series of S’s. I, who was called the family tightwad, said, “What good is an “s” without a dollar mark through it?”

“Wouldn’t you know our little tightwad would say that,” said mother. “But who knows, someday there might be some real dollar marks come from it.” There did, amounting to a fabulous fortune, but unfortunately not for us. It was “a mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds that grew into a big tree, a giant oak.”

He went to the paint store and ordered a bright yellow paint mixed, and stood there testing it on wood and directing them to make it brighter, “like the vivid sunflower, yellow so as it could be seen on dark stormy days.” He liked yellow. It seemed to express his sunny disposition. He personally supervised every tiny detail. That color paint became known as “Traffic Yellow,” according to the Fuller Paint Company, and it is still being used to paint traffic signs and traffic lanes. For years, it was used to brighten up the old streetcars and was later used on buses.

He ordered an electrician at the Union Pacific Depot shop to fix the wiring and supervised that. He drew the plans for and personally supervised its construction and paid every workman out of his salary.

He had no lens or glass of any kind over the openings. He decided he needed something to magnify the lights and took the wall scone on our kitchen wall as a model. Most families had them on their walls and placed a lighted candle or kerosene lamp before it to throw the glow into the room. After electric lighting came to the city, they were no longer needed, but were often kept as souvenirs or heirlooms. Lester took our wall scone to a tinner or tinsmith who worked over by the depots or in one of the depot shops doing their various tin jobs. It was used as the pattern and the shell-shaped reflectors were made of bright polished tin to be placed behind each light globe. They were hammered and fashioned by hand into the desired shape. Everything about the lantern was made by hand.

The machine age had not arrived. Everything—pianos, furniture, toys—were painstakingly made by hand and were usually much superior to the machine-made products which came later when they began turning everything out like sausages, called “mass production.”

Many people have asked me to write about the first traffic light, saying, "It is a beautiful story and should be given to the world."

Lester had a hard time convincing Chief Grant that the light would work or be any improvement to the old way of handling the traffic situation, but Lester persisted and finally persuaded him to at least give it a little trial. If it didn't work one could always go back to the old ways.

After the lantern was mounted atop the square wooden post and secured to the square wooden base or platform, it was placed in the center of the intersection with the streetcar tracks barely missing it. A two-way throw switch was put on the post to be manually operated by the traffic policeman. An electric wire was dropped from the network of trolley and light wires overhead. The post was painted white, and the square wooden box or base was painted the same bright sunflower yellow as the lantern above. As a result, Lester developed and designed the first electrically directed traffic signal in the world. It was installed in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, in the year 1912, at the intersection of Second South and Main Street with the usual curious crowd to watch it being installed.

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May 22, 1962

Gentlemen:

*Each of the signers of this letter is now, and since a time prior to the year 1912, has been a resident of Salt Lake City and an interested observer of its growth and development. We have watched traffic conditions change from the horse and buggy and the advent of the automobile to the present congested motor traffic with its semaphore controls. The first traffic semaphore was installed in Salt Lake City in the year 1912. Each of us remembers this date by association with other events that transpired at the time and which enables us to fix that year with certainty in our recollection.*

*We are signing this letter in order that you may have documented information as to the year in which the first traffic light was used in Salt Lake City.*

R. Ken Thomas  
Joseph H. Preece  
Charles Jorgenson, Sr.  
Gus P. Backman  
Leah D. Widtsoe  
Eugene C. Hinckley

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R. Ken Thomas went to high school with Lester. Joseph H. Preece was a member of the City Commission at the time and remembers the difficulty Lester had in bringing it before them. Charles Jorgenson, Sr. was a police patrolman walking a beat and sometimes relieving the traffic officer. Gus P. Backman was Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce. Leah D. Widtsoe was an author and the widow of a president of the University of Utah, John D. Widtsoe, who was also one of the twelve apostles of the LDS church. Eugene C. Hinckley remembers the excitement it caused. Fisher Harris, head of the Metropolitan Water District, said, "I concur it is 1912. His memory should be perpetuated in a prominent place and prominent way."

Salt Lake City was still a little hick town. The Hotel Utah and Walker Bank Building were being built that same year.

Lester was the first one to use this hand-operated traffic light, then showed Earnie Lesser how to use it and appointed him to be in charge of that intersection. It was a novelty, even a joke. People said, "What is that 'birdhouse' doing there? Do people have to stop or go just for a light? Just imagine!" People would congregate on the corners just to watch it. Lester was almost discouraged. He had tried to help, but the traffic light was received with ridicule, animosity and criticism. People always throw bricks at those ahead of them.

"That is all right. Let them scoff," counseled mother. "Necessity is the mother of invention. There was a need for it, and to think it was my own son who thought of it," she said with justified pride. So, my brother, Lester Farnsworth Wire, became the father of the traffic light.

The police station in 1913 moved into the YMCA building on the corner of 105 South State and named it the Public Safety Building. They were there until 1962.

A few of the citizens thought it (*the light*) was a big improvement and urged there be one or two more. Lester was advised to take it before the City Council or City Commission and ask for funds to make one or two more.

"I remember he had a very hard time to bring it before the City Commission," said Joseph H. Preece, a former member of that body. The city fathers turned noses up and thumbs down. They were always too busy to listen to him and turned a deaf ear. According to the municipal record of that time, they spent much of their time giving rooming-house licenses and approving liquor permits. When he came home, mother would say, "What did they do today?"

“The same old thing,” he would reply. The Mayor, Mont Ferry, was usually absent from their meetings. Lester would stand to be heard and they would call on someone else. Lester was a patient man. One time when he stood they actually asked him if he had something to say. “No, I just got up to spit!” he said in disgust and walked out. However, the next time he went before the City Commission they listened!

Lester had a quiet dignified way. He was with the traffic light like he was with everything else. He did not make much of it. He was friendly to all, and no one but his mother and sister knew he was sometimes disheartened. One of “the boys,” R. Kendall Thomas, who was with Lester at Salt Lake High School told me years later, “We used to make a lot of fun of Les, fooling around with those lights. None of us ever thought anything would come of it. We just thought he was playing around and wasting time. If we asked him what he was doing, he would quietly reply with that little smile of his and a twinkle in his eyes, “Testing the light. I think it will work all right. Maybe someday I’ll have something.”

There were a lot of pros and cons. Some people objected strenuously. Some were even rancorous, all of which Lester endured because he loved his fellow man. Some said it was taking away their freedom; this was a free country. John J. McClellan, foremost Tabernacle organist of his time, said, “There is nothing as hard to cope with as ignorance.”

Some wanted the traffic light at Second South and Main removed as it was one more thing in the street and was blocking traffic from going down the center of the street if it wanted to. Some wanted more, and so the battle raged. Tourists were impressed, saying, “We came from a big city and have nothing like this. Yet this is a hick town and they have something to control traffic.” Eventually other cities began to ask questions about it.

If vehicles stopped for the light to change, local pedestrians who were lined up to watch would yell, “Are you waiting to see if the birdies will come out?” Someone else would yell, “I saw a birdie that time, now you can go.” Some even called it “Wire’s birdcage” or “Wire’s pigeon house.” Oddly enough, that first traffic light or semaphore was taken to the Salt Lake City Zoo at Liberty Park. The inside was removed and it actually was used as a pigeon house. Eventually the zoo was removed to the mouth of Emigration Canyon and named Hogle Zoo, and Tracy Aviary was opened where the zoo had formerly been. The traffic light was still there, still being used as a pigeon house where it was seen daily by visitors. Some knew its history and pointed it out to their children. Some did not know. Although it was seen by thousands no one seemed to realize it was a museum piece. Lester, who was a modest type, said to me, “That is a piece for the Smithsonian.”

After my brother passed away, April 14, 1958, that original electric traffic light mysteriously disappeared. I still think it is concealed somewhere. When his friends started the Wire Memorial Museum and Historical Association, we were trying to locate the original one. A park gardener said, "There are traffic lights all over the world now. Why should anybody be interested in that first one?" Truly, there is nothing as hard to cope with as ignorance.

The superintendent of the Tracy Aviary, Calvin B. Wilson, had the original wooden post dug up for me when I asked for it. It is now in the possession of the Wire Memorial Museum and Historical Association. Furthermore, he was most cooperative in giving us minute description when we were going to have a replica made. So, our replica is exact in size and correct in every detail. "I know. I saw it every day for many years," he said, "and I will be willing to go to court any time, if need be, and back up my statements." A copy of his letter follows:

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May 22, 1962

Gentlemen:

*For a number of years, I had in my custody the original first traffic light installed and used in Salt Lake City. This was the traffic light invented by Mr. Lester Wire.*

*I have examined the replica of the traffic light which you have made and which is now in your possession, and it is a replica of the original traffic light first installed and used in Salt Lake City, which I had in my custody.*

*Superintendent of Tracy Aviary  
Calvin Wilson*

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Lester was even called a dictator because they had to stop or go for a light—his light! Thus, he had to suffer the penalties of leadership. "That is all right," comforted mother, "someday they will thank you for it." He replied, "I would like a little more taffy and not so much epitaphy."

Soon another traffic light was put at First South and Main, and eventually one was placed at Third South and State. They had no filigree or gingerbread trim. Only the original one had that. The wheels of the streetcar barely missed the wooden base and the officer had to move to the other side of the base for the cars to pass. Sometimes streetcars went in opposite directions at the same time and one going north passed one at the intersection going south, but the officer stood beside the platform on the side where he was safe. The traffic light at First

South and Main was operated by Martin D. McGuiness. Charles Jorgenson said he was walking a beat in 1913 on First South to Main and used to relieve McGuiness to have his lunch. The traffic officer always stood beside the platform and never on it.

The traffic light seemed to be a thorn in the side. With all the furor and dissension it caused and lack of cooperation it is not surprising that Lester, age 24, did not think of having it patented. They grumbled, "No other town has it and they get along, so can we. We don't want these new-fangled ideas." Some would drive along as though there was no light or policeman there. When Lester yelled at them and chided them, they would say they could not see the light, they were color blind. Being color blind became a joke. "We had a lot of color blindness in those days," mused Lester, "a lot of it."

If they jogged along, they expected the traffic officer to wait before he changed the light. They would yell, "Hurry up, it's about time to milk the cows." Farmers from nearby hamlets those days were real "hayseeds" although not all the offenders were farmers. It was not unusual for a farmer to go down Main Street with a large load of hay, vegetables, or manure.

People were beginning to be a little traffic rule-conscious, but some still persisted in walking across the street whenever and wherever they chose. Lester coined a new term, "Jay Walker."

In the summer, the traffic officers had the merciless sun beating down upon them and the pavement was almost hot enough to melt under their feet. The asphalt would get so hot it would ooze. The driver of the Salt Lake Ice Co. wagon would stop the big ice wagon which was drawn by two big horses, and the iceman would good-humoredly place a huge block of ice at the feet of the traffic officer to help his feet keep cool. Mr. Lynch, the owner, had this done. It would last a very short time and melt while the people were watching it. Everyone was amused, including the traffic officer.

One morning, when the traffic shift came on, they found one of the lights in shambles, the pole, lantern, platform, everything a mass of wreckage, turned over and destroyed. This was the first time but far from the last. New traffic lights would be made to take their place, but they were often found destroyed in the morning. The peoples' behavior was nothing to their credit. It was malicious vandalism as there was hardly any traffic at night at that time. It was done by adults. A strict 9:00 p.m. curfew, which was rigidly enforced, kept young people off the street.

Three or four men, slick characters, managed to get a traffic light made and were taking it through small towns in Utah, along with a train for children to ride. They attracted all the simple but prosperous farmers and children and sold stock in the traffic light, a nonexistent company. Lester said, "We have been having them watched and will shortly have them arrested for selling fictitious stock." Mr. Russel, manager of the maintenance department of the Salt Lake Lines, said as a child he remembered them coming to Eureka and selling stock at a small amount of 25 cents or so per share and 5 cents a train ride. I forgot whether they were arrested and served time or not.

Lester decided to put the lantern on a pole eight feet high so people could not say they didn't see it. The square wooden platform was exchanged for a square cement platform with the tall pole placed in it. It was still in the intersection and still manually operated by the traffic officer standing beside it as before. He later decided to have colored glass, which he had painted green or red over the openings and used the clear globes which had stronger wattage. He then decided on lens coverings which he got from the Union Pacific Depot shops, the kind they used on caboose lanterns. He got most of his equipment from the depot shops. It had all been used and discarded.

In 1913, the signal phone system had been perfected. A salesman from the Gamewell Co. of Boston, Massachusetts, passed through the city trying to sell police alarm boxes, police telephone boxes, and fire alarm boxes. The police and fire departments both gave him an order. Gamewell was and still is a manufacturer of police and fire alarm apparatus. The salesman was very impressed with Lester's traffic light, and they conferred at length about it, Lester explaining it to him. The more he saw it the better he liked it. He examined it carefully, and Lester let him direct traffic with it for a while. He suggested Lester write to Gamewell and ask them to send a representative out to see it, which he did.

He came home delighted and said, "With Gamewells passing through once in a while maybe I will get somewhere. With a little fresh air blowing in it might help to clear the fog around here." The representative, Oliver Crocker, came. Lester showed him his plans and explained what he had done and what he wanted to have done. The representative from Gamewell said those certain parts could easily be made.

Gamewell was a subsidiary of General Motors, owned by the DuPonts. However, there was often delay in securing those parts or material for their construction, which delayed installation of new semaphores, as they began to be called. Lester's main concern was to have "my men" off the street in all kinds of weather. Although they were older than he, they began to affectionately call him "Dad."

In 1914, "Doc" Shores succeeded B.F. Grant as Chief of Police. He was a general favorite. Lester spoke of him as a real he-man. He had fought Indians with Buffalo Bill, and had gunned down many a notorious outlaw when he was a sheriff in Colorado. He was a character of the Wild West and could tell many hair-raising true experiences he had had. He was a good chief, knew police business and how to cope with the underworld, but after three years he was dismissed because he was not a Utahn, but came from Colorado.

In 1914 or thereabout, Lester decided a little platform attached to the light pole on the corner would help. It would be large enough for a tiny stool for the officer to rest occasionally; a large, umbrella-shaped roof or awning to keep the sun and rain off, a circular bar or rod for him to rest his hands on, and in the winter, an awning curtain for protection from the snow or bleak wind. There was a ladder of three or four steps for him to get in or out of this cupola. This was taken away and put over by the building when not in use. Later, there were three or four tiny permanent steps built to the platform. This cupola was nicknamed "The Coop" and was used until 1924. The semaphore was manually operated from this cupola by the traffic officer. With this new arrangement, the handling of traffic in the business district was greatly simplified.

Lester was always studying how to make improvements, always experimenting. He did away with the square cement base and decided to use a metal base pedestal to support the tall eight-foot wooden pole to protect it from "careless" drivers and careening cars. He decided to have the two lights side by side instead of above and below so people could see the change of lights better. But people still liked to say they could not see the lights change and that they were color blind.

This new traffic light box or lantern was two feet wide, long and high, with the mechanism in the upper half. The roof still sloped, letting the rain run off, with one long hinge on top. The openings were eight inches across and round. He now used a plain flat lens. In the late afternoon when the sun was sinking lower, they did not deflect the sun's rays. It would shine in the box in such a way that it would be hard to tell whether or not the light had changed. He next had the lenses slightly curved. Even these did not deflect the sinking sun's rays and made it look like the light was on. These became known as "mirage lenses." It was several years later that carving was put on the back of the lens to deflect the light.

This is the way the traffic lights looked in 1914. Notice the cupola or "coop" on the corner light pole. *(reference to photo not included with manuscript, but a similar photo is in the collection at the Utah State Archives)* The woman in charge of the pictures at the Utah Historical Society told me in 1962, "This is a picture of a little light which I think was used in some way to regulate the

streetcars.” I explained it was a traffic light. “Oh, it couldn’t be!” she exclaimed. How quickly people forget, and the younger generation never seems to know, or care. They seem to think things were always as they know them today.

The light complete cost around \$90 apiece. Anytime it was suggested or a petition made for a new light, the City Commission groaned, moaned and argued—and argued, and argued!

There was a cartoonist in the Tribune who was very popular who made good-natured fun of various citizens. He always ended with a wise little duck in the corner with a little philosophic word of wisdom. One day the little duck said, “Li’l ol’ Les Wire should put a traffic light in each corner.”

Speeding or “joy rides” became popular. Some even sped as fast as 20 miles per hour.

Opposition was beginning to die down. However, there were still many traffic violators. “We are going to start and arrest them,” said Lester, “and when we do, just sit by and listen to the roar go up; it will rock the town.” Mr. Jorgenson became the first motorcycle officer to pursue traffic violators, and his picture was in the paper giving a traffic order to a woman violator. Underworld characters now used the automobile as getaway cars, and two policemen were trained to drive autos so they could pursue them.

When there was a traffic violation—going through a light or some offense—the officer would shrilly blow his whistle. The offender was supposed to stop—and sometimes, they did. He would get out of his “coop,” go over and bawl them out with, “In a hurry to milk the cows?” or “Haven’t you cut the hay yet?” or some little sarcasm. Often the culprit would hurry on and get away when he saw the officer getting out of the coop, but there were not so many cars in town but what their number was remembered.

While the officer scolded them or took their name, address and phone number, or wrote an order to see the judge, the light was not changed, and people would impatiently toot their funny little Model-T Ford horns. They did not give tickets in those days, just a piece of paper written by the officer which was often torn up and thrown away. Lester later had printed forms made.

When the culprit went before the judge, he gave them a scolding. The laws were not adequate to deal with traffic offenders after traffic violation arrests had been made. So, people knew if they were arrested all they would get would be a scolding. Many were arrested many times for the same offense. It almost became a farce. Then they started fining them, but not for

years, until fines were made big enough to pinch the pocketbook, did people begin to take heed.

Some motorists still complained they could not see the lights change, so Lester had an electric whistle made that gave a shrill sharp whistle every time the light changed. They were put in every traffic light corner. People in offices had to complain about that also, saying it was too noisy and they couldn't concentrate. However, its use continued for many years. It is still being used at Third East and First South for the blind people at Murray B. Allen Center for the Blind.

Lester appointed the following men to watch the busiest intersections in the business district: William Tucker, Art Lund, Walter Jewkes, Martin D. McGuiness, William Walgreen (*illegible correction to the manuscript here*), Henry Schranz, Earnest Lesser.

"The years of 1912 and 1913 were the experimental years. By 1914, the traffic lights were beginning to bloom, and by 1916, they were coming into full blossom," said Mayor Earl J. Glade. By the middle of 1916, the Traffic Squad was a firmly established adjunct, and Police Chief Parley P. White created the new office and title for Lester of "Traffic Sergeant." He was no longer a patrolman.

The patrolmen always wore navy blue suits with brass buttons both summer and winter, with grey derby hats. Their shiny badge was on the left breast. Many times, this was the target for some gangster. Lester always said, "The badge is the target." In the winter, they wore long navy-blue overcoats with their trouser legs tucked into latch boots, and pale grey derby hats.

Lester was proud of his Traffic Squad and created new uniforms for his men. He had them wear khaki in summer. Instead of derbies, they wore hats, white gloves which were always immaculate, and shoes which were well polished every day. He gave them military inspection before they left the station for their corners. In the winter, they wore navy blue with long overcoats, black shiny leather leggings up to their knees, a cap and black gloves. The snow was very deep in those days.

The new addition of the traffic light at the intersection of First South and State Street "has been of great value," said a newspaperman.

The traffic and speed violators were beginning to be a problem in the residential districts where there were no traffic lights. Motorists would seldom wait for a person to alight from the streetcar and sometimes killed them while alighting or before they could reach the

sidewalk. Usually the same old excuse was given, "They couldn't see them." A certain type of people resent discipline whether it is the law, a policeman, a traffic light, or just a sign saying "keep off the grass."

Traffic violators were becoming a major problem. Lester asked for and received permission to have members of other departments of the city made "special officers" to help capture traffic and speed violators. This proved to be so successful it was long continued. The motorcycle squad was increased.

The newspapers and editorials called on the people to earnestly cooperate, put foolishness aside and begin to act adult. "The public should appreciate that the traffic problem has moved in the residential districts, and that cooperation is necessary if those drivers of autos who menace life and property are to be apprehended and punished. The department will gladly respond to reports of traffic violations and will, if desired, keep secret the names of the informants. The department earnestly courts such assistance." (*Municipal Record*, Vol. 5, January 15, 1917—now page 32)

Lester intended to patent his electric traffic light or semaphore and spoke to an attorney about it, but his plans were cut short by the entrance of America into the World War. When the United States entered the World War, "the war to end all wars," he enlisted August 8, 1917, "for the duration." Dr. Hugh B. Sprague, a close friend who was by no means an organizer or military man, asked Lester to organize an ambulance unit. Dr. Sprague would be the head of it and would name it the Sprague Ambulance Unit. He would be the medical director with the title of captain; the lieutenants also had to be physicians.

Lester organized this motor ambulance company of 100 men in one week. It was Utah's first contribution to the cause of mercy, and Lester was its director. At Fort Douglas, it was given the name of Ambulance Company No. 27. They were sent to Camp Grant, Illinois, where it became Ambulance Company 343 of the 311 Sanitary Train, 86th Division. It was called the "small hundred from Utah."

Dr. Sprague told us, "I would not have gone to war if Lester had not helped me. I didn't know anything about the military. I am a medical man, only Lester had the brains." Lester was promoted from private to first sergeant and took care of all the clerical work of that company, "for the duration."

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Gift watch to Sergeant Wire. Boys of Ambulance Company 343 remember him on Liberty Day:

November 20, 1917

*When the evening mess was sounded last Wednesday at Barracks 2310, which is the abode of Ambulance Company 343, there was quite a ceremonial affair in behalf of their much beloved top sergeant, Lester F. Wire. Of course, one would naturally be led to believe that it would be in connection with the United States Liberty Bonds, considering the day upon which it took place, but let it be stated that it was pertaining to an entirely different matter.*

*In order to express their appreciation for the good work that top sergeant is doing and has been doing since the organization of the ambulance unit, all the boys chipped in and the proceeds were taken to Rockford, where a handsome wristwatch was purchased. The token was presented by Sergeant Milner. The gift was a surprise to Sergeant Wire, and for a time he was at a loss to express his appreciation, but finally recovered sufficiently to thank them heartily and state he would try to make himself worthy of their trust in him. The promise, however, was not necessary as the boys fully appreciate what this man is doing and has done for them. The party wound up in "three cheers for Wire."*

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From Camp Grant, they were sent to France and saw active service at the battle front, at Marne and other famous battles. The motor ambulance had to go out under fire and gather the wounded and dying. The 86th Division was known as the famous Black Hawk Division. Fifty percent of it were killed. For every one killed there were seven wounded, and of the seven, only six were able to return to the front.

Before Lester left for war he appointed Henry Warden to hold his job as Traffic Sergeant for as long as he was in the Service.

After the Armistice, November 11, 1918, Lester was mustered out and received his honorable discharge papers at Camp Grant, Illinois, on January 31, 1919. He immediately returned to the family home in Salt Lake City. Chief of Police White and the department had a reception and dance in his honor in the gymnasium of the Public Safety Building or Police Department Headquarters, Number 105 South State.

He was asked to tell some of his experiences during the war, and at the conclusion Chief White said he would immediately be reinstated as Traffic Sergeant. This brought forth a burst of applause. The men cheered and whistled and the ladies waved their handkerchiefs. But Sergeant Warden, whom Lester had appointed from the ranks, thought otherwise. He liked the

job Lester had “loaned” him, and refused to give it back. Lester was forced to “walk a beat” again as a patrolman.

He was amazed to discover the traffic light was still a public football. After a year and a half away at war, he returned to discover the local “brains” were still arguing, for lack of better things to do, about whether or not it was a good thing. Hamilton Parks, whose popular column “The Senator from Sandpit,” recalled, “There was even an editorial by Malmquist in the *Salt Lake Tribune* in 1919 saying it was an infringement on people’s freedom, this was a free country, and the city was subject to a suit. The town is not big enough for a thing like that.” The dear old town has certainly had a hard time to grow up, but as Lester said, “It has been a lot of fun watching it grow.”

When people saw Lester walking a beat as a patrolman after his return from war they demanded an explanation. Chief White had said he would reinstate him immediately. Warden refused to give up the job to Lester upon his return. There were newspaper articles and editorials. Chief White then promoted Lester to the Detective Bureau where he remained until his retirement January 1, 1946. He was instrumental in solving forty-three murders.

Salt Lakers would travel to other cities. Traveling through the Eastern states they discovered that traffic was still being directed by arm signals. People would say, “Oh yes, you come from the city that has the traffic light. Why is it they have it and we do not?” They would return well pleased and say, “We think we are living in a hick town, but we have the traffic light, and the big cities do not.” Tourists liked it, and other cities began copying it and making it.

Some friends of ours traveled through the Eastern states and said the traffic was still directed by arm signal. “Back here in li’l Salt Lake we have the traffic light and think nothing of it, but the big cities back East did not have it. One has to go away sometimes to discover how advanced Salt Lake really is.” People who made long cross-country trips said when you stop at a red light you have an instant for prayer.

One day before Papa drove to Los Angeles, he drove our Model-T Ford by Earnie Lesser’s corner. Recognizing him, he called good naturedly, “Take that wreck off the street.” Papa called back just as good naturedly, “It isn’t a wreck; it’s a Ford.” People used that remark many times afterward.

Even while walking a beat, Lester was thinking of his old love, the traffic light. He was a perfectionist, always striving to improve. He returned to his original idea of having the windows or openings above and below each other on all four sides. He had shields, rims, or “blindners”

put around the lenses to shadow them, something like the blinders people use on horses to keep them from shying. It was a square lantern, and instead of being put on a pole, he had it hung in the intersection from the network of electric wires overhead. This overhead system was still manually operated by the officer in the cupola on the corner light pole and was met with approval of other cities.

He then decided that tin or metal would be more durable. He went to the Union Pacific Depot and had the smokestack taken from a discarded locomotive engine. He had the men at the depot cut the size he wanted with two openings facing the four directions. The shields were longer and circular and were black—maybe that would make the red and green lights appear brighter than the “traffic yellow.” The openings were about 10 inches across and cut from stove pipes. There were 8 different chimneys used on that. This first metal model was on display at Crouse-Hinds in Syracuse, New York, for many years, until 1964 when I asked for it for the Wire Memorial Museum. They replied they had thrown it away two days before.

Lester again thought of having his traffic light patented. He spoke to an attorney who told him his statutes of limitation—latches—or time allotted for taking out a patent, had expired. The attorney told him his time was only good for five years. He had brought it out in 1912, although he had made many changes and improvements from the original. He explained he would have patented it in 1917, but did not due to his sudden change of plans, enlisting, when America declared war. The lawyers were timid, apathetic and jealous shysters. He was told that his time had expired. Offering himself as a possible sacrifice for his country was not considered.

“You mean they don’t consider your patriotism? Isn’t that worth anything at all?” we said, indignantly. Where was the justice anyway? Patriotism was not considered at all when it came to a little point of law. He had offered himself “for the duration,” and risked not coming back, while men his age or younger, who stayed at home with a nice soft job came out the best and were protected by his invention.

After the war, patriotism and sacrifice were quickly forgotten. Many of the returned veterans had to stand on street corners, even in blizzards, selling apples at five cents apiece because no one would give them a job. There was no relief and welfare in those days. There was much bitterness. Lester took it calmly, as he did everything, and said, “The law is the law,” but I have always felt deep resentment at the injustice of the whole thing.

A man by the name of Reading, who was an electrician with the fire department, had been carefully watching the different improvements that Lester had made, asked questions,

and Lester had explained various things to him. Reading, with a local tinner named Carver, decided to make the traffic light “professionally” and make a fortune. They named it the “Reading and Carver Traffic Regulating Device.” (*Deseret News*, April 29, 1922, Pictorial Section) As the first one had been called “Wire’s Pigeon House” by the public, this one, they themselves called, “Reading’s Coffee Pot.” Charles Jorgenson (Lester’s colleague) said, “Everything was going along fine until that fellow butt in.”

The first one Lester made was a very homemade, hand-made affair. More glory to him. Nevertheless, it was the acorn that grew into a worldwide giant oak. Looking back, the first of any invention always seems crude, whether the light globe, movies, airplanes, locomotives, televisions, automobiles and telephones, but the seed was planted which later becomes a challenge to those who follow. Through the ages, all the great improvements started with another man’s dream.

“I have had nothing but double-crossing, hatred, censure and rancor ever since I started it,” Lester said when telling us of this injustice (i.e., Reading & Carver). “From now on, I am absolutely through with it. I will not give them any help in any way. From now on, they can all go to hell.” They sold a few. However, their machinations and double-crossing got them nowhere. Lester’s guidance was removed. They even had the audacity to ask his advice on how to do certain things. He replied calmly, “Sorry boys, you figure it out.” The fame and fortune they tried to usurp came to naught. Reading’s only son was electrocuted while working on their light.

Every new chief has to be the broom that sweeps clean. Everything that was done before that individual went into office was not worth saving—in his opinion. All designs, drawings, directions, and correspondence that Lester had done with the traffic light was destroyed. Any records, pictures, history, or clippings of the police department prior to 1928 are indeed scanty. There were 60,000 news clippings destroyed in two years. Herman Hogenoon, City Recorder, had whole office forces looking and no word of any kind regarding it could be found. Many have said, “It is inexcusable and criminal that those records were deliberately and maliciously destroyed.”

Accurate traffic statistics were not kept until 1933.

Various subsidiaries of General Motors began making the electric traffic light or semaphore, and eventually it was placed in all the principle cities in America. A policeman in Chicago by the name of Kleinsteuber added the amber or ‘caution light.’ He also did not have it patented. The people who owned General Motors and its subsidiaries who took Lester’s idea

also liked that idea, and included it. But his chief of police and mayor were not small-town. They were aggressive and said, "You sue, and we will stand back of you." He did, and the DuPonts paid \$3 million just for the amber light.

In 1930, the two Philadelphia lawyers who handled Kleinsteuber's case came out here to see Lester and asked him also to bring suit through them. Lester asked several local lawyers, but they were timid, as usual. He told us, "I have asked several people to help me, but they are not of the same stuff that the policeman in Chicago had back of him, and I haven't the money to fight the DuPonts." The electric traffic light or signal or semaphore as such has never been patented by anyone, although various later gadgets and improvements have been.

Kleinsteuber and Hayes later made some of their traffic lights in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Various states wanted to claim the honor of being first. In 1922, a city in Iowa claimed they had the first traffic light and would take out a patent. Chief Parley White wrote, "Don't you dare. We have already had it ten years."

In 1924, the "Iron Mike" (General Motors product) was installed in Salt Lake. The old cupolas or "coops," which had been on the corner light poles wherein the traffic officer sat controlling the traffic since 1916, were now removed. The officer no longer controlled traffic manually. It was, for the first time, done by an automatic switching device. It has all been an evolution of Lester's idea.

Mother and I lived in Los Angeles from 1927 to 1931. There were no traffic lights or semaphores there or in Hollywood or environs at that time. The traffic officer still stood in the center of the intersection with arms outstretched, in all kinds of weather—usually nice, but the sun and pavement could be blistering hot, and the winter could be very cold. Mother commented, "Doesn't it seem queer and old fashioned for a wonderful big city like this not to have traffic lights." We especially noticed it on the intersection where we regularly went to the Philharmonic Auditorium, where we had to leave or wait for cars and transfers.

The traffic officer at this intersection was very kind to give us time to make the crossing, especially when mother later had to use a cane due to an injury to her ankle. We were grateful. Mother said, "I can see how people leave their fortune to a stranger who has been kind to them, especially if they were alone. I feel the same about that young man." When we told Lester he said, "I wish you had told me. I would personally have found out his name and written a letter of thanks for being so nice to my two girls."

Years later, I was on a bus in Salt Lake and sat behind the driver. We had to wait for the light to change. The man who was sitting opposite me said, "Let's see you drive through that light, I dare you."

"No siree, not I," replied the driver. They did not know who I was. The bus driver said to the man, "Do you remember how we used to cuss that fellow Wire when he first brought out these lights? We couldn't call him anything bad enough. I don't know what we would do without them now. We used to think he was taking away our freedom or some fool thing like that."

"Yes, that's right. We certainly cussed that red light," replied the other one. "They are all over the world now. What would we do without them? We simply couldn't get along. He brought safety to the whole world."

Lester chuckled when I told him. "They called me everything in the book. They didn't miss a thing. They didn't overlook one, not one!" Once, he smilingly remarked, "I guess I have stopped more drivers than any police officer alive." Yes, his invention will march down the corridors of time as a benefit to all mankind.

The Harrington-Seaberg Company was formed in 1921 but did not make signals until 1923. In 1929, the Gamewell Company of Massachusetts bought out the Harrington-Seaberg Corporation, which was one of the early companies in the traffic-light field. It is now known as the Eagle Signal Company of the Gamewell Division, Moline, Illinois. Kenneth W. Mackall, former sales manager of the Crouse-Hinds Company of Syracuse, New York, made a hobby of collecting information on early developments in the signal field. He is now retired and living at Cicero, New York.

The first traffic light in Europe appeared in London on March 14, 1932. It was inaugurated at the junction of Cornhill, Bishopsgate, Leadenhall Street, and Gracechurch Street. It was inaugurated, with appropriate ceremonies, by the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Maurice Jenks, and was the first one to be installed in Europe. They called them electro-matic signals and the electro-matic vehicle actuated road or electro mechanical automatic traffic signal. They are manufactured by the Automatic Telephone and Electric Company, Ltd., whose addresses are Strowger House, 8 Arundel St. London, W.C.Z., and Strowger Works, Liverpool. They produce them on a larger scale than in America and have exported them all over the civilized world (Holland, Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, Shanghai, etc.) Many modern pictures show them as still being used on the post in the center of the intersection, like Lester originally had them.

Lester had some enemies, but his friends were legion. He is now called the Savior of the Highway. Some call him the Saint of the Highway.

When we wished to have a replica of the first traffic light made for the Wire Memorial Museum and Historical Association, the carpenter wanted a ridiculously high price. A Scottish carpenter from Edinburgh, William Stout, said, “I will make it free of charge just for the honor of working on it. You Americans don’t know how we feel about such things in our country.”

Always when crossing the street, I would look blocks away when there was the one large semaphore and see stretching in either direction the red and green lights. They looked like a necklace of emeralds and rubies. It was especially noticeable if the day had a haze or slight fog; and I thought of the holly and berries—the evergreen—the symbol of eternity. I was always intensely proud of it, but there was also always a little bitterness over the many injustices Lester had suffered all the way through in giving this wonderful gift to the world.

In many pictures from all over the world, floods or other catastrophes, the traffic light is always shown there to guide people. Kings and peasants alike have been protected by it. One of his friends said, “Every traffic light in the whole world, whether it is in a big city or a little country cross road is a memorial to Lester F. Wire.”

Now with several lanes of traffic, the semaphores have again changed shape: smaller, and one for each lane dangling all across the street. As the density of traffic increases, it will be a constant challenge to the traffic light engineers, and there will be new stages of development in the future, but the fact remains that the little hand-made traffic light of Lester Farnsworth Wire in 1912, in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, will always be the very first in the world. He invented something to save humanity—not destroy it. He was a magnificent character. As mother said, “Holly is an evergreen—the symbol of eternity. I know your idea will live on and on.”

Nowadays, if a traffic light is out of order, people report it immediately, and an electrician is there to fix it as soon as possible. On many occasions, during the short time the light was not working, there have been accidents and casualties.

There is even a traffic light at St. Ann’s Gate at the Vatican, placed there in March of 1962. It has grown into a stupendous industry, employing great numbers of factories using men in the actual construction and more men in placing and maintaining them. The amount spent in salaries is enormous, with a fabulous annual income, a multibillion-dollar industry. But the highway or city commission did not put a traffic light on our own corner at my brother’s request, who was always thinking of others’ welfare. Although the school children are always in danger, they said, “If you take up a petition and get enough signers we might.” Lester replied, “After all I have done?” Such injustice.

In January of 1942, a month after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into World War II, Lester was made, in addition to his police duties, Assistant Coordinator of Civilian Protection. He organized the Legion Alerte and the Salt Lake City

Emergency Disaster Committee. He gave 5,000 hours of his time in non-combat duty and was given a citation by Governor Herbert B. Maw. He also worked as coordinator with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Fort Douglass Military Intelligence Section. He was an expert on subversive organizations and activities. He was nationally known as an inventor and Utah's most distinguished detective. He was a member of the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Order of Founders and Patriots of America, Order of the Crown of Charlemagne, honorary member of the French Société Nationale d'Encouragement au bien des Alpes-Maritimes, and is listed in *Who's Who*.

He developed heart trouble due to overwork during World War II and retired on January 1, 1946. He passed away at his home on April 14, 1958. Flags were lowered to half-mast. Requiem Solemn High Mass was celebrated at the stately Cathedral of the Madeleine. At the military funeral which followed in the city cemetery, twelve motorcycle police, with motors muffled and handle bars tied with black crepe accompanied the cortege—three preceding the hearse, three on each side of the hearse, and three following the cortege.

Lester was always disappointed but held no bitterness towards any. Before he passed away he said, "It is funny those older men didn't think to patent it or advise me. I was just a kid, 24 years old."

Lester is now called Savior of the Highways and Saint of the Highways. Bouquets always come so late. It was suggested that he be buried at Arlington Cemetery, but I still prefer the city cemetery where there are four generations of our family.

The *Deseret News Telegram* had an editorial by Les Goates, as follows:

Lester Farnsworth Wire, known nationally as an inventor, and throughout the Mountain West and Pacific Coast as Utah's most distinguished detective, was a man of many interests and talents. His death Monday at the age of 70 left a wide circle of friends, admirers, and business associates in numerous fields of endeavor who will be sorry he has gone but glad they had the privilege of knowing and working with him.

Versatility and resourcefulness are kindred qualities that all too few of us possess. Lester Wire had them both. His resourcefulness prompted him to invent the electric traffic semaphore, for which he was given place in "Who's Who in America." In speaking of his achievements, he once said more in jest than in self-acclaim, "I guess I have stopped more drivers than any police officer alive."

His versatility carried him to success as a detective, traffic organizer, one-time coordinator of civilian protection, ambulance corps director, sportsman, and Boys and Girls Club sponsor and advisor.

Lester Wire with all his versatility possessed a high degree of individuality. He had his own peculiar desire and tastes; he made his own decisions as far as his authority would allow and had no desire to imitate or be anybody but Lester Wire. In none of his many activities was he prone to jump to conclusions or indulge in guess work.

Community life in Salt Lake City has been made more convenient, more enjoyable, and safer because of the various contributions of this good man. To his sister, Edith Wire, his only surviving relative, the Deseret News expresses sincere condolences.

Note: This biography was transcribed from Edith Wire's handwritten manuscript, now in the collection of the Utah State Archives. The transcription text has been only lightly edited to improve readability. Notations regarding intended photo insertions were removed since these photos can no longer be identified, and in some cases, may be lost. It is likely, however, that some of the photos Edith intended to use are part of the archived collection. (2023)