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Let 'Em Holler: A Political Biography of J. Bracken Lee
by Dennis L. Lythgoe

F. Ross Peterson

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It has been over a decade since J. Bracken Lee retired from Utah public life. For over forty years, Brac Lee was immersed in Utah
politics, serving as mayor of Salt Lake City for two terms. He also sought election to both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. He gained national attention as a critic of the graduated income tax and federal deficit spending. As a dominant force, Lee combined natural political knowledge with tremendous energy and sustained amazing political popularity. Dennis Lythgoe has spent the time since Lee’s retirement preparing a political biography of this colorful and controversial Utahan. Utilizing extensive personal interviews and the Lee papers, Lythgoe has attempted to evaluate Lee’s political impact.

Although Lee gained considerable national attention, his career was Utah-centered and his influence on Utah was considerable. As governor and mayor, J. Bracken Lee was willing to fight many battles, some important and others mere shams. When he fired those who opposed him, be they liquor commissioners, police chiefs, or university presidents, he did it with flair and finality. Those who despised Lee were numerous, yet the voters kept electing him. This is why Lee is still an enigma. Although J. Bracken Lee is a non-Mormon (his wife is LDS), he usually had the support of many General Authorities of the predominant church in Utah. That fact is confusing as Lee was often accused as mayor, both of Price and Salt Lake City, of running open cities. “Open” means that his administration was easy on prostitution, vice, and liquor law enforcement. However, in every Lee election, even when he ran as an independent, there was a large LDS constituency that voted for him. Lythgoe’s explanation of this electoral success is that Lee’s fiscal conservatism, his passion for economy in government, and his Republicanism endeared him to such LDS leaders as J. Reuben Clark, Thorpe B. Isaacson, and Ezra Taft Benson, who in turn influenced the Mormon vote.

Lee’s political career is fascinating, and this book has certain elements of captivation. There is no doubt that the author knows his subject and handles it fairly. Lythgoe does not fall into the biographer’s trap of being so close to his subject that he loses objectivity. However, Bracken Lee is such an exciting subject that more is expected than the author delivered.

The long-awaited biography has definite limitations which are somewhat surprising. There is no bibliography included, immediately hampering the critical reader. More upsetting is the fact that Lythgoe relies almost totally on oral interviews, newspapers, magazines, and the Lee papers. Why the papers of Republican contemporaries such as Senators Arthur V. Watkins and Wallace Bennett were not used is a mystery. The papers of Governors George Dewey Clyde
and Herbert Maw are available and contain many items on Lee, yet these sources do not play a major role in the biography. The many congressmen who served while Lee was active are also ignored as primary sources. These criticisms do not negate the value of the oral interview nor the significance of Lee’s papers, but the use of other papers would have added essential interpretations. Noticeable by their absence are articles in scholarly journals or theses and dissertations on Utah political history. There are some excellent studies of specific elections, campaigns, and people.

Another major problem with the volume is organization. Lythgoe chooses to use a short chapter format (an average of fourteen pages) which means that some of the chapters are vignettes which stand like a picture of an isolated city in the midst of a seascape. There is little attempt at transition, and the abrupt shift hampers the narratives. Three examples illustrate this point. One chapter is mistitled: “Hatred for Lawyers: Parnell Black and the Taylor Case”; and another is “Battle with Bateman.” Sandwiched between them is a potentially important chapter on Mormon church influence. Both outside chapters discuss Lee’s attempt to force resignations from public officials. As Lee lost both cases and there are definite similarities, the two topics would make for effective treatment in a single chapter. The third example concerns a brief chapter, “Don Jesse Neal and Capital Punishment.” This chapter could have been located anywhere, but written as it is, it should not be included. Lee is incidental to the story. There were six executions during Lee’s gubernatorial tenure; Neal is the only one discussed. The author does not develop Lee’s ideas or philosophy on the subject. Lythgoe does suggest that the “Neal Case was to Governor Lee what Joe Hill was to Governor William Spry” (p. 191), but that conclusion is unfounded and undocumented, and indicates simply the chapter is a filler.

Lythgoe’s main difficulty in Let ’Em Holler is a lack of analysis. Unfortunately, he rarely asks why events took place or why Lee did what he did. For instance, why was Lee admired by ultraconservative groups so much? Was it his opposition to the United Nations, his refusal to pay personal income tax, or his spirited defense of Senator Joseph McCarthy? Why did he attack Utah’s senior Senator, Elbert Thomas, as being “a stooge, who has been too long associated with the reds, the pinks, and the fellow travelers?” (p. 87). Although, Lythgoe entitles one chapter “McCarthyism and Justice Wolfe,” he never reveals why Governor Lee was caught up in the McCarthy phenomenon, why he used the tactics of fear and smear. If
accusations were wrong, as they have been shown to be, then the author needs to evaluate that behavior.

Lythgoe comes very close to handling the delicate subject of LDS influence on Utah politics, but he again falls short in his conclusion. Lee was absolutely brilliant in maintaining a close relationship with Church leaders and simultaneously rejecting their counsel on numerous occasions. Lythgoe never uses the evidence to state that some individual General Authorities used their position to influence politics. The best evidence is contained in a footnote on Douglas Stringfellow. This tragic and significant occurrence should not be buried in a footnote, yet it is. Governor Lee and Senator Watkins argued over whether or not Representative Stringfellow, who ultimately admitted that he had parlayed false war stories into a term in Congress, should be dropped from the 1954 GOP ticket. Agreement was reached only when Ezra Taft Benson called and said "drop him!" Because Lee was open, apparently honest, and cooperative, Lythgoe has accumulated massive evidence on the topic of Church influence, but he does not analyze that information and provide answers as to why the Church leaders did what they did to exert influence. In this regard, Lythgoe fails to mention one of the most controversial events in Lee's gubernatorial career. Together with Thorpe B. Isaacson, a Mormon General Authority, and also chairman of the Utah State Agricultural College Board of Trustees, Lee fired Louis Madsen as president of USAC. Although there are two chapters on education, Lythgoe never mentions the Madsen firing or Isaacson's part in it. This is admittedly touchy material and would have to be handled carefully, but Lythgoe has elsewhere demonstrated the capacity to do so. One is left to question why he sidestepped the matter. Lythgoe also needs to deal more directly with the sensitive question of when is a General Authority acting in his capacity as a representative of the Church and when he is acting in a professional role or as a common citizen.

J. Bracken Lee requires more analytical study. He was an amazing person who incited intense feelings of hatred and devotion, the very kind of material that lends itself to biographical analysis. Lythgoe, who was able to gain the trust and cooperation of numerous people, was in a good position to make such an analysis. Perhaps in the final consideration, however, his connection with people and his wide use of personal interviews may have caused him scholarly difficulty, because, in the end, he is reluctant to write hard conclusions. At times J. Bracken Lee was narrow, arrogant, petty, and wrong. At other times he was broad, compassionate, understanding, and right. It is the biographer's obligation to help the reader reach conclusions
about the personality and character of the person under study. In this case, the reader is never given the help needed.