Hector Lee

Published by

Stanley, David.
Folklore in Utah: A History and Guide to Resources.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9243.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9243
Hector Lee

David Stanley

Hector Lee was the only one of “The Three Nephites”—the others were Wayland Hand and Austin Fife—not born into the Mormon faith. As he explains in his 1985 reminiscence (reprinted below), he was born in Texas in 1908 but grew up in the remote Utah village of Hatton in Millard County, where he became interested in the folkways of his Mormon and Paiute Indian neighbors. After earning his Ph.D. in English at the University of New Mexico—with a dissertation on the Three Nephite legends—he returned to the University of Utah where his administrative skills soon became evident. In 1944, he succeeded in getting a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to sponsor research projects on Utah folklore by such well-regarded scholars as Juanita Brooks, Lester Hubbard, William Mulder, Helen Papanikolas, and Don D. Walker. Lee also founded the Utah Humanities Review, a quarterly journal that in the late 1940s published articles on regional folklore and history. Lee’s enthusiasm for western folkways must have been contagious, for a number of writers and scholars throughout the state turned to folklore as an important and vital part of their pursuits.

Hector Lee, then, was central not only as a collector and scholar of Utah folklore but also as an early influence on other scholars and writers who helped establish folklore as a subject worthy of public attention and professional scholarship. Part of Lee’s talent for disseminating folklore was his skill as a raconteur, jokester, and storyteller, an ability evident in his recording, Folklore of the Mormon Country (1964), on which he performs J. Golden Kimball and Brother Petersen narratives. Unfortunately for Utah, Lee left the state in 1947 to accept an administrative position at Chico State University in California; later he moved to Sonoma State College, where he spent the rest of his academic career. He remained active in folklore studies until his death in 1992.

Following is Lee’s memoir, written for the Utah Folklife Newsletter in 1985.