

Lester Farnsworth Wire

Inventor of the first Traffic Light

Wire was born on September 3, 1887, in Salt Lake City. He attended Salt Lake High School. In high school Wire was a football star and expert marksman and also helped create the first men's and women's basketball games. He later received an appointment to the West Point Military Academy by Senator Reed E. Smoot, but was unable to attend. In 1909 he enrolled in the University of Utah, but couldn't afford it, so in 1910, he joined the police force in Salt Lake City. As head of the department's first traffic squad in 1912, he was charged to control the chaos on the city's streets, which included automobiles, horses and buggies, trolley cars, and pedestrians traveling without any right-of-way laws. He wrote the first traffic regulations for Salt Lake City and appointed patrolmen to direct traffic at the busy Main Street and 200 South intersection.

Wire wanted to find a better method to control traffic other than make his patrolmen stand long hours in the center of a busy intersection under varying weather conditions, so he created his first electric traffic signal. It was a wooden box with a pitched roof that contained red and green lights on all four sides. It was mounted on a pole, wired to the electric lines of the trolley cars, and operated manually by a patrolman who could sit in a booth on the side of the road. It resembled a birdhouse and was disregarded by residents who called it "Wire's pigeon house" or the "flashing birdhouse."

Some visitors to Salt Lake City were impressed with the design, and Wire's design was adopted and improved for cities such as Cleveland, Ohio, and Detroit, Michigan.

Five years after Wire's invention was first used, Salt Lake City had the first interconnected traffic signal system in the United States. Wire's light was automated in 1924. He continued to improve his design, even after he moved on to detective work. His design was eventually made from the smokestack of a locomotive engine, which made it more durable.

His original wooden stoplight was moved to the Salt Lake City Tracy Aviary where it was used as a birdhouse until it disappeared. His original metal stoplight was on display in Syracuse, New York, for many years, but was eventually thrown out.

Wire never married and died on April 14, 1958.

You can find his burial site at the Salt Lake City Cemetery designated as Plat P, Block 9, Lot 13, Grave 3 East.

