

An era ends: Maritime curator is sailing off

By REGINALD THOMAS
Free Press Staff Writer

6-29-80

A worker at St. John's Episcopal Church phoned the Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle in 1969 to arrange a tour for herself and a group of handicapped persons at 8 p.m. on a Tuesday.

"I told her we closed at six and we weren't open on Mondays or Tuesdays," the museum's curator, Robert E. Lee, recalled. "I asked her whether she could change the date, and when she said she couldn't, I figured they were volunteers."

Lee decided to give them a grand tour on his own time, and as a reward a member of the group said he could get Lee a photograph of the Yoreda, the former flagship of the Detroit Yacht Club.

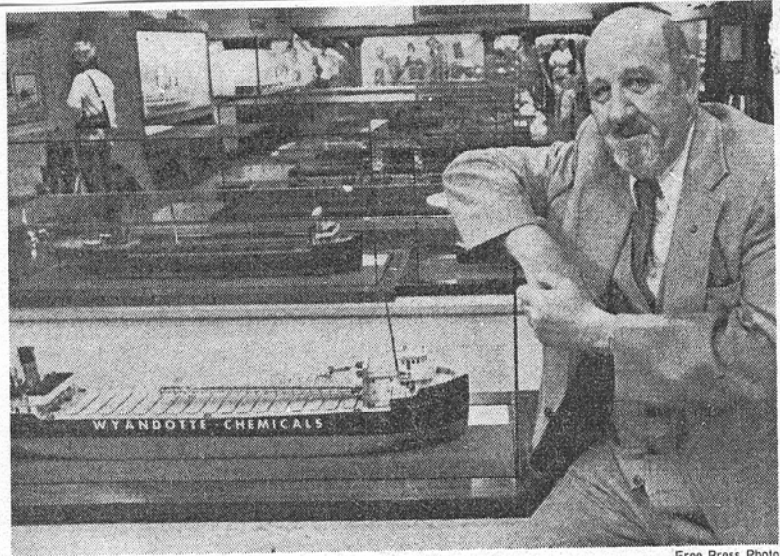
Lee figured it was just another promise until the man returned with a photograph and a guest list from the ship's owner, Mrs. Aaron Deroy.

Lee became more attentive.

HE CALLED on Mrs. Deroy and eventually solicited enough money from her to build the Aaron Deroy Hall on the southwest corner of the museum, which houses artifacts from the Yoreda (A. Deroy spelled backward) and other boats.

Not a bad acquisition for a man whose name and appearance conjure visions of a Civil War general — they're not related — instead of an enterprising curator of a maritime museum.

Through his daring, hustle, kindness and what some jokingly call his con artistry, Lee,



Free Press Photo

Robert E. Lee in the museum: "My association with the sailors has made me a salt."

62, has increased the museum's exhibits from 12 model boats and a few artifacts to 40 models, 50,000 pictures of ships and 1,000 books and manuscripts.

As he approached his Monday retirement he remained involved in maritime activities, firing the starter pistol at noon Saturday for the annual tugboat race on the Detroit River. A spokesman at the museum Saturday said no successor has been named for Lee, the only director the museum has ever had.

"HE'S A REAL fine public servant," said Capt. Bill Hoey, owner of Gaelic Towing tugboat company and a personal friend of Lee's. "In the time he has been there he has done a great deal for the city."

"It's hard to get people to donate to a museum owned by the city or the federal government. But people have given gifts because of his efforts."

Lee was born in 1918 in Brighton, England, and entered the United States in 1919

via the Detroit-Windsor border. He took to the Great Lakes and the Detroit River with ease.

A look at his office — equipped with a battleship gray desk, membership certificates from various marine organizations, a model tugboat and a fake figurehead — affirms the direction his life has taken.

"I came in as an administrator, and my association with the sailors has made me a salt," he said. "I won't say an old salt because I don't think I'm that old yet."

DETROIT'S OLD maritime museum was in the J.T. Wing steamship, which deteriorated and was burned in 1959 by the city.

"After the city burned the Wing, there was a void," Lee said. "The Dossin family filled the vacuum and gave half the money for the museum, and the city gave a matching grant."

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Maritime curator trims his sails

MUSEUM, from Page 3A

Lee became director and curator.

Working without an acquisitions budget — the city pays for staff and maintenance — the museum has had to depend on benefactors to improve its collection.

For example, when Lee's prized possession, a 7½-ton carved oak room from the steamship City of Detroit III, was for sale, Lee raised \$10,000 by offering souvenir stock certificates from the defunct Detroit & Cleveland line.

The room and a chandelier, which Lee reconstructed using a postcard as a guide, were installed by the museum's regular staff, the maintenance crew, Lee and one master carpenter. Lee built and restored many other museum artifacts himself,

and he lost a thumb while building a pilot house next to the Deroy Hall.

HE IS ALSO an active railroad enthusiast, the author of a book on the Edmund Fitzgerald ore boat and the editor of the "Telescope Magazine."

Although he was never a professional sailor, he has sailed on numerous ships and recently returned from a week as a guest on a freighter that traveled around Michigan and parts of Ohio.

"I've been on freighters before for educational reasons," he said. "But this was pure and simple pleasure."

"I guess I'm kind of a waterfront rat. I learned it all on the job. I'm the last of a kind of people you won't find anymore."

Would You Believe It... 8-20-81

Detroit's Own Robert E. Lee

By Steve Spilos

Before he retired a year ago, Robert E. Lee, curator of the Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle, and his wife, Ruth, maintained an apartment above the museum which overlooks the Detroit River, the world's busiest waterway.

They had the best all-around view in the Great Lakes area — and downstairs in the museum, Bob devoted his life to his work.

When I first met Bob during a meeting of the Algonquin Historical Club, his name amused me, but it had nothing to do with the great Civil War general.

"My father was an American," he said. "He joined the Canadian army during World War I and met my mother in Brighton, England, where I was born."

A born storyteller, raconteur, and "gentle boss," Bob sustained the museum through some very trying times with the assistance of a dedicated staff and many public-spirited citizens.

He jokingly referred to himself as a "nickel immigrant" and had a good reason for it. His parents returned to Windsor from England and in 1919 moved to Detroit.

"That's when a ferryboat ride between Windsor and Detroit cost five cents," he laughed.

During World War II, Bob served in the U.S. Army and then went to work for the J.L. Hudson Co. trimming windows.

While building models of old trolley cars, he met Henry Brown, director of the Detroit Historical Museum, and in 1952 accepted an assignment with him.

Bob took an active role in the establishment of the Streets of Old Detroit, a major restoration program. He also worked on exhibits at old Fort Wayne and the Schooner J.T. Wing, which was stationed at Belle Isle.

"The J.T. Wing had an illustrious history," Bob said, "as a World War I sailing vessel. It served as the city's first marine museum until November 1956, when it was burned with pomp and ceremony by the Detroit Fire Dept."

With the help of the Dossin family, the new Dossin Great Lakes Museum was opened July 24, 1960 — on Detroit's birthday — and Bob Lee became its first curator.

On display you'll find some unusual nautical exhibits, including the restored Gothic Room from the "City of Detroit III," last of the lavish passenger steamers.

"Palace steamers — as we call them — were built before the Civil War," Bob said. "Progressively, they got better and better and were still around 100 years later."

The fresh-water ship model collection of the museum is the largest in one scale — one-eighth inch per foot — to be found anywhere.

"It's the work of volunteers," Bob said, proudly. "It gives

youngsters the opportunity to see that the City of Detroit III is larger — much larger — than a tugboat."

The collection takes in La Salle's "Griffon," the first vessel to sail on the upper lakes in 1679; the Walk-in-the-Water, first sidewheeler to cross Lake Erie from Buffalo to Detroit in 1818; the USS Michigan, the world's first iron ship; many sailing vessels including the modern self-loaders; the J.T. Wing; and Bob's favorite, "The Thousand Islander," an excursion boat that sailed from Detroit to Wallaceburg and on charters to Georgian Bay.

Among the marine paintings, Bob pointed to Seth Arca Whipple's popular "Champion and Tow." The tug Champion is actually towing eight sailing vessels past Belle Isle on its way to Lake Erie, where more sailboats waited for it to make the return trip to Port Huron.

"It's one of many paintings," Bob said, "that survive today as vivid, almost haunting proof of the splendor of bygone days."

Bob's "pride and joy" — and his great gift to future generations — is the extremely ornate Gothic Room in the museum.

"We restored it from the City of Detroit III," he said, as we strolled under the elaborately carved arches of his grandest display.

Picking up the 7½-ton Gothic Room in Cleveland and storing it on the exhibit floor until the moldings and woodwork were completely restored turned out to be a nightmare.

Bob and his staff worked day and night on their own time to achieve it.

Architecturally, it's the only example of American "Steamboat Gothik" extant. Along with the museum's exceptional maritime exhibits, it's a priceless heritage.

Bob's retirement was

brought on by illness. Two weeks ago — Aug. 7 — he died at Harper-Grace Hospital. He was 63.

He is survived by his wife, Ruth, two stepchildren — Georgia Weatherspoon of Phoenix and David Shankland of St. Paul, Minn. — and five grandchildren.

Bob may be gone, but his contribution to Detroit's maritime history will always be a part of our great city.



Robert E. Lee, Belle Isle museum curator

By MICHAEL WAGNER

Free Press Staff Writer

8-9-81

Robert E. Lee, for 21 years curator of the Dossin Great Lakes Museum on the south shore of Belle Isle, died Friday at Detroit's Harper Grace Hospital. He was 63.

Storyteller and model craftsman, whom employees remember as a gentle boss, Mr. Lee was a self-educated

river historian who joked fondly of being a "nickel immigrant" back when it cost five cents to ride the ferry from Windsor to Detroit, as his family had.

Mr. Lee was born in Brighton, England. His father, an American who joined the Canadian army to fight in World War I, married an English woman, and in 1919 the Lees came to Detroit.

MR. LEE served in the army in World War II and was working for J.L. Hudson, building models of trolleys, when he met Henry Brown, then director of Detroit's Historical Department. In 1952 Brown offered Mr. Lee a

job preparing displays in the department.

The grandest of Mr. Lee's displays is the salon Gothic Room that was taken in pieces from the City of Detroit III, a side-wheel steamer, and reconstructed at the museum. "This is the most ornate room I know of ever put on a ship," he said at the time.

Mr. Lee refurbished the room's elaborately carved arches, columns and spandrels of English Oak, its stained glass windows depicting early Detroit landscapes. Mr. Lee constructed from pictures a chandelier that once hung in the room.

"I GUESS I'm kind of a waterfront rat. I learned it all on the job. I'm the last of a kind of people you won't find anymore," Mr. Lee said in a Free Press interview when he retired last year.

He was a member of the Great Lakes Maritime Institute, the Historical Society of Michigan, the Detroit Historical Society and the Algonquin Club.

He is survived by his wife, Grace; a step-daughter, Georgia Weatherspoon of Phoenix; a step-son, David Shankland, of St. Paul, Minn., and five grandchildren. Funeral services will be private.

Obituaries

Robert E. Lee, curator of Dossin Museum, 63

By Denise Crittendon 8-10-81
News Staff Writer

The Detroit Historical Society was responsible for the 1960 construction of the Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle. But it was self-taught historian Robert E. Lee who raised the necessary financing and searched the state for noteworthy exhibits.

He spent 20 years building the museum's collection.

He was a former house detective turned museum curator who had a penchant for passing on ship folklore and salvaging artifacts from Michigan shipwrecks. By the early 70s, he had garnered enough contributions from prominent citizens to add another wing to the museum and rebuild an original ship smoking room from a sunken Detroit steamer.

Mr. Lee died Friday at Harper Hospital. He was 63.

A Sterling Heights resident, he grew up in the Detroit area and held a variety of jobs.

His career with the Detroit Historical Society started during the early 1950s when the former director asked about the creator of several trolley car models which were donated to the society. The creator was Mr. Lee, a hobbyist who was "very good with his hands."

In 1952, he accepted a job offer from the society and began arranging exhibits at Fort Wayne. In 1960, he was promoted to the newly built Dossin Museum.

He wrote *Edmund Fitzgerald*, a book detailing the travels of the Edmund Fitzgerald ore boat and

Magazine, published by the Great Lakes Maritime Institute.

He was a member of such historical groups as the Algonquin Club, Propeller Club of Detroit and Historical Society of Michigan.

He is survived by his wife, Ruth; two stepchildren, Georgia Weatherspoon and David Shankland; and five grandchildren.

There will be a private funeral service at Mr. Lee's request. Memorial contributions may be made to the Michigan Cancer Foundation.