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Influences that Made Jason Lee

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INFLUENCES THAT MADE JASON LEE

A paper read at the Annual Meeting of the New England Methodist Historical Society by John K. Montgomery. Jan. 15, 1934

Vermont was a wilderness with scattered settlements of pioneers, wandering Indian tribes and occasional trappers, both French and English, when the last quarter of the 18th Century dawned. On the westward side of the Green Mountains were as many as 700 persons and on the eastward slope, fewer.

Into such a wilderness Daniel and Sarah Lee with their nine children moved in 1791, having left the more settled part of Connecticut for the sparsely settled wilderness near what is now Pittsford, Vermont on a site selected by Mr. Lee during an exploration trip into the region at least five years previous. During the residence here, four more children were born in the Lee home. Whether there was dissatisfaction with the new home; whether the moving blood of the Lees craved action and adventure; or whether there was desire to be with other Connecticut families who were now settling in the virgin territory which later became Orleans County, Vermont we do not know but that for some reason the family moved there is ample evidence for household equipment was loaded and the pioneers moved across the Green Mountains, travelled east and northward and founded a new home in the north lake country. The mere incident of the establishment of the international boundary between Canada and the United States placed the home built in the new clearing on Canadian territory. A few years of sojourn in this "betterment" as the clearing was called, sufficed the family and again a new location is sought, this time further inland and a new portion of Canadian forest is claimed for civilization. In this new clearing, near what is now Stanstead, Province Quebec, Jason Lee

Consider this fact. Lee was but three years old when the first Sunday school in America was founded and that not in the "cultured" family of pioneers.

Both the parents of Jason Lee were of English stock with colonial foregrounds. The first Lees settled near Cambridge, Mass. but later moved to Connecticut. The Whittakers went originally to Vermont, some few miles south of Stunstead. Lee was only fourteen years old when the lad was but three years of age and his mother left him an orphan at thirteen years. The man is silent as to the influence of his parents but it is not hard to believe that such hardy and daring parents would leave to their son a heritage of inspiration and courage. Certainly the Lee desire for adventure demonstrated its qualities in the later years of Jason's life.

What kind of people made up this environment? A Vermont historian, writing a few years after Lee's death, described these early pioneers as "a brave, hardy but uncultured race of men. They knew little of the etiquette of refined society, were blessed with few of the advantages of education and were destitute of the elegancies and in most cases of the common conveniences of life."

One can share with the historian the latter part of this evaluation. Of course, they did not possess the common conveniences of life. Who does in such a primitive environment? Likewise it is no test of one's mental power to conclude that they were devoid of many of the elegancies of life, as environment such as was theirs develops not the refinements but the heroics of life. I cannot share the implication, however, that because of these facts, these people were stupid, backward or uncultured. I believe their interests and capacities along these lines will be demonstrated by the relating of a few incidents from their life.

Consider this fact. Lee was but three years old when the first Sunday school in America was founded and that not in the "cultured" communities along the coast where during the two hundred years of settlement some of the "refinements and elegancies" of life had been realized but in the wilderness of the north country at Craftsbury, Vermont, but a few miles south of Stanstead. Lee was only fourteen years of age when this movement had expanded to such proportions that communities some distance from Craftsbury sent delegates to the first Sunday school convention, of "exhibition" as it was called, held in America.

Or, consider again the educational ambitions of these uncultured folks. It is true that their educational facilities at first were primitive. Lee went to school in a log cabin or log barn for six months of the year in two three month terms. He studied spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic. His grounding in these subjects must have been sound or his latent capacities great for his record at Wilbraham Academy indicates that Lee was a student of no little ability.

But our uncultured settlers were not content with these simple educational advantages. An Academy was founded at Stanstead in the early 1800 'ds for Lee later taught in the school, the bricks of which school building now form the walls of a residence in Stanstead. Perhaps in no other sphere of life does the quality of these early settlers so divulge itself than in the activities connected with the building of these early schools. Think of driving cattle two hundred and twenty miles over primitive roads from the Canadian Border to Brighton, Mass. that money could be secured for the building of a school.

Such is what the settlers in Derby, Vt. did with cattle which had been given in redemption of pledges made for the building of Derby Academy and in this manner cash was secured for the building enterprise.

We have to go to Browington, Vt. for the most heroic tale in this passion for schools. Browington borders on the territory in which the first Lee betterment was located. Here we come across the heroic though stubborn Alexander Twilight. He came as principal of a small school but sensed the need of a greater. The challenge of culture hungry youths was his inspiration and a plodding old ox was his companion in toil but these plus his will were sufficient for the task. From the hills he quarried the native stone and laying the granite blocks, tier upon tier he built his "Athenian Hall", a structure four stories high, sixty feet long, forty feet wide, equipped for the various educational disciplines, including the teaching of domestic science. Every window of this "old stone house" as the building is now locally known takes in the sweep of the beauty of the north country and no one can walk through its halls but feel the spirit of the past, a spirit of hunger for culture and faith enough to answer the hunger. From this school in 1839 a class of 57 young men were graduated, all of whom were children of these pioneers and many of whom were friends of Jason Lee, undoubtedly. In after years a history of the class was written but unfortunately a large number of the class had been lost to the writer's knowledge but of the number who could be found we find 5 preachers, 5 lawyers, 2 doctors, 2 judges, several legislators and many business men, a record of which any institution might well be proud and especially so if the material was sons of "uncultured" pioneers. What contact with such men and women meant to the young orphan we can only surmise but it is within reason to believe that their influence on the boy in the direction of integrity, action and inspiration was large.

Let us turn to the physical environment in which Lee lived and see the influence of such environment upon him. Here we find a three fold contribution - the strength of the hills; the cunning of the forest life; and the appreciation of beauty.

The strength of the hills was Lee's. Those early winters were characterized as "winter nine months of the years and late fall the remaining three." Life to endure in such weather had to be rugged and vigorous. The cabin in which Lee was born nestled among great trees in a forest "primeval where the murmuring pines and the hemlocks" sugar producing maples, towering ghostlike white birches, spicy scented cedars made their contributions to the settler's life but exacted toil and labor as recompense. Around the field in which the log cabin stood is one of those typical New England stone hedges, an evidence of the difficulties encountered by the settler before the cleared land could be made tillable and a monument to his industry and toil by which the difficulties were overcome. Is it any wonder that under such physical surroundings the lad grew into a man six feet three inches tall, well muscled and well proportioned, weighing more than two hundred pounds, his "spiritualistic" blue eyes showing forth an inner cleanness and sound health?

The forests not only gave him health but taught him cunning. The hand sickle and woodsman's ax which adorn the north side of a monument erected near Lee's home to these early settlers typify the kind of toil required to earn an existence in those early days. Orphaned at the beginning of his teens, Jason Lee writes that he "was thrown out upon the world without money to provide for all my wants by my own industry." He cradled grain, became an expert judge of cattle and timber, became an expert with the ax and before his majority was leading gangs of men into the woods for lumbering and logging

operations. It is said that he could chop a cord of rock maple in two hours time, a feat requiring not only strength and skill but a proper understanding of wood as well. When Lee went to Oregon he found himself well prepared by this forest discipline for his new tasks for the new tasks were not unlike the old tasks, both forest primeval demanded the same knowledge, cunning and skill. It is doubtful if any could have been found better fitted for the task of building a mission than was this lad from the north country.

Growing out of his contacts with nature came also a very fine appreciation of beauty. Over and over again in his diary he refers to the beauty of the Oregon country. The Rocky Mountains with their snow caps, the cataracts of the Columbia River, the sweeping plains are given especial attention. Whence came this appreciation? I make bold to suggest that it came out of his fellowship with the beauty of nature in his native woods, a beauty which is yet to be found in that north country though virgin forests are gone and second growth a poor second to that primeval glory. Whether it be in the first red buds of the springtime, clothing the bare branches of winter in a hopeful sheen; or in the deep blue sky of summer mirrored in the deep, blue waters of a score of lakes, sunken water pools surrounded by green mountains; or in the beautiful tapestry of fall when the hillsides are as a gorgeous carpet; or in the winter time where in the deep woods the spruce and the hemlock and the fir are weighted down with canopies of snow and the silence makes the voice of the soul to sound like thunder; there is a beauty in that north country which only the native to the hills and adopted sons can appreciate and in their love claim for it an uniqueness. Did not this kind of beauty speak to this growing lad a myriad language as he held communion with it? How it must have "disturbed him with the joy of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime!" It has so disturbed strong men since.

Back of the little clearing where Lee was born is a low knob of land called "Dufferin Heights", the highest point for some miles on the Canadian Side of the border. From the brow of this hill now cleared of course, one can see a horizon three hundred miles in circumference, taking in lakes and forests, mountain ranges and valleys, pastures and rivers, fields and villages. A hundred years ago this knoll was clad in tall hemlock and fir and pine. I like to think the adventurous blood of the Lees caused this youngest of the pioneer family to select the highest tree on the knoll and there to build in its top a platform, a crow's nest, from which he could take in the glorious panorama of nature; Washington to the southeast, Mansfield and Couching Lion to the south, the dimly seen mountains of New York across and beyond Champlain, Orford nearer home and to the north the mountains of the St. Lawrence Valley. Did his heart hunger to know what was beyond the ranges? Through the calling of God, he was to learn.

We have been considering the influences of his fellows and his primitive environment. From appreciating beauty to discovering God is not a long step. As we well know, no wilderness is so remote that the messenger of God does not eventually find his way into it. And our remote north country was no exception to the rule. The New England Conference took in this distant territory and one of its far extended circuit points was Coops Ferry on Lake Memphremagog, near the present site of Georgeville, a few miles north of Stanstead.

It was, however, under the leadership of Rev. J. Hicks, first Wesleyan minister to this region that the spiritual life of Lee was first awakened. During his revival services, the fire burst into flame but it did not long continue to glow. Five years later, however,

in a forty-day protracted meeting under the direction of Rev. Richard Pope the flame again was brought into life, this time to stay, to cast its comforting gleams in moments of dark, personal tragedy, to show its inspiring glow to rough men along the wilderness path, to lighten the pathway of those who worshipped in darkness.

The conversion was brought to a head by some words of the nephew of Jason Lee, Daniel, but a few years his junior spoken by the young kinsman as the two walked home from a morning service. In the prayer service preceding the regular meeting that very Sunday evening Jason Lee stood up in the prayer meeting to announce his conversion "while all hearts thrilled as his tall form arose and he began to speak." With tears streaming down his face he told the story of a saved man. Let us hear Lee describe his experience: "Thus far I had lived without hope and without God in the world but now the spirit which I had so often grieved, again spoke to my conscience and in a language not to be mistaken, warned me of my danger. I saw, I believed, I repented, I resolved to break off all my sins by righteousness and my iniquities by turning to the Lord and if I perished, I would perish at the feet of Jesus, pleading for his mercy. I saw the fullness of the plan of salvation, cast away unbelieving fears, believed in and gave myself to Christ, and was ushered into the liberty of the children of God. I was now by my own consent the property of another and his glory and not my own gratification must be the object of my pursuit."

Was this a genuine religious experience? It is by its fruits that it shall be known. Are we not right in demanding that a religious experience meet satisfactorily these three tests?

- (1) Do we find in it a quality of faith which is able to aid others seeking spiritual certainty?
- (2) Is the experience of such proportions as to be equal for any testing experience of life?
- (3) Does it bring forth a service worthy of the experience of God?

In the time still allowed me, I propose to examine the religious experience of Lee, believing that this experience is the very center of the power of his beautiful service to his God.

Was the quality of Lee's faith such as to be of help to others in seeking religious certainty? His friend and classmate Osman Baker gives us the answer for he records "With what confidence and satisfaction seekers of religion would place themselves under his instruction." Surely here is a physical giant who is also a place of refuge for the spiritually weary. In fact the whole extent of his missionary passion indicates the ultimate reach of this experience.

Was his experience of such proportions as to be equal for all the testing experiences of life?

I speak this morning to many who like myself came out of the West to the city of Boston for a theological education. You will agree with me, undoubtedly, that the life in the city with all its attractions and its complexity was no small testing of our faith. Lee went from the East on the long overland trail to the west, each step of the way carrying him farther and farther from home. Yet on this testing experience one of his biographers writes as follows: "On the way the elder Lee conducted himself so as to command the respect of all, religious and irreligious. The character of the man unfolded in beauty and fragrance under the stimulating prairie sun..Not that there was present any inclination toward a relaxation of principles, as is the case with so many on leaving home and all its healthful restraints; on the contrary, he felt himself more than ever the chosen of God, as he was thus brought nearer him in nature where he was sustained and guarded by day and at night enfolded in his starry covering."

Again, the facing of tragedy is a time that tries men's souls. Twice in his brief ministry Lee was forced to face the tragedies of life. In the facing of the first tragedy he was forced to lean only upon God.

Lee had left his mission to seek funds and recruits in the East leaving in Oregon, his young wife, Anna Pittman Lee, who was then great with child. The time of travail came and passed and the death angel had carried back to the realms of the Spirit the young wife and the first born child. A messenger was sent to carry the news to Lee and came upon him as he was traveling near the city of St. Louis. We are told he took the news without flinching though his heart was torn within him. But personal loss could not turn him back, and with heavy heart he continues in faith toward the East.

The second time sorrow pressed upon him, he was bereaved in the death of his second wife, Lucy Thompson Lee, a native of Barre, Vermont. This time we are permitted to see the great soul bared and to behold its matchless beauty. "Do not contemplate", he writes to their mutual friend, Osman Baker, "Do not contemplate your old friend as disconsolate and disheartened. No, my brother, discouraged I am not. In heaviness I cannot be while the grace of God as hitherto bears me above, entirely above that region. I feel it would be sin to waste my energies in fruitless grief or unavailing sorrow, and yet I am aware that is the sustaining grace of God in me that preserves me from it. Glory to God in the highest. I can exalt in the midst of the furnace. One like unto the Son of man is with me and I expect to come forth without the smell of fire upon my garment, "in affliction deep, sustained by glorious hope." Upon the same occasion he wrote to his nephew: Well, thank God, the religion of Jesus Christ is a reality. The joys and glories of heaven will soon be reality."

Still again, how do we behave under criticism, especially when we know that the criticism is the result of jealousy and personal enmity? Truly this is a testing time. And Lee was not spared that. In the "great reenforcement" which accompanied him westward on his second journey to Oregon were men of many natures and gifts.

Some of these should not have been taken to Oregon and were found to be misfits before the new country was reached. Dissatisfied, peevish homesick, they sent many complaints back to the Board at New York and as a result Jason Lee was recalled from the supervision of the mission. From a distance it looks as though the Board acted with haste and with little patience. Lee hurried eastward a second time to defend himself and his mission. How wonderful in character and how gracious in personality he is as he makes his defense. For many days he appeared before the Board, answering his critics with frankness but with no show of bitterness, nor malice, nor hatred. Hear him say that he will be most happy to have a successor if that is the only way the mission can be brought forward and succeed. What a fine attitude and what Christian experience. Truly, in the midst of a bitter testing he emerges, not only restored to the mission but untouched by any of the flames that would have consumed us in our passion.

• Did this conversion bring forth a service worthy of the experience of God?

Daniel Lee tells us that "Jason Lee, after many struggles under the impression, 'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel', ventured tremblingly forward in obedience to the divine call and about five years after his conversion began to invite sinners to repentance." Something of Lee's passion is to be found in his own words written in a letter to Osman Baker while the steamboat carried him down the Ohio: "My dear brother, I go as Paul went to Jerusalem, bound in spirit, not knowing what will befall me there but thank God, I have had but very few anxious thoughts about anything else except being faithful in the cause of Christ. That is enough, that is all."

Early after having made up his mind to serve God in the ministry two questions took his attention? Am I fitted for this task? Where shall I serve?

He answered the first question by deciding he should have more schooling and selected Wilbraham Academy as the school where he would prepare himself for his calling. At 26 years of age he entered the Academy and acquitted himself with honor. He was given charge of the large room where the little boys slept and by his diligence, integrity and trustworthiness earned a high place in the regard of the principal, Wilbur Fisk.

In all the influences that moulded Lee's life, we cannot neglect the confidence which Fisk reposed in him. It was through this churchman that Lee came into the Oregon picture. While Lee was on the far off mission point, or while he was moving back and forth over the East, Fisk "held the rope" so he was not lost to civilization or prepared the way for him that his message would have hearers. If Wilbur Fisk had not supported Lee as he did, it is doubtful if he could have accomplished all that he did. Truly, Fisk was not only bondsman for the church but was friend and father to the missionary.

The second question as to the sphere in which Lee would serve was settled by circumstances over which Lee had little or no control. At first he served churches near Stanstead but the Lee blood could not be satisfied in such a settled place. Then the Indians of the far northwest of Canada appealed to him as a fertile field for missionary labor and he at once offered himself to the London Wesleyan Missionary Society for such labors. However the death of the secretary of the Society made impossible immediate action and before his offer could be considered other events had shaped his destiny.

In 1833 from out of the West came a thrilling story. Four Indian chiefs of the Flathead Indians had come across the Rocky Mountains to St. Louis in search of the White Man's Book wherein they had been told was to be found the proper method of worshipping the Great Spirit. The story was relayed Eastward and was finally announced to the East through

a letter published in "The Christian Advocate and Zion's Herald." Here it was read by Wilbur Fisk, the president of Wesleyan University. So great an impression did the challenge make upon him that he read the story while standing and wrote two letters while standing and had both in the post within two hours time. One letter went to the mission board in New York. In this one he announced that he would be "bondsman for the church" and stressed the immediate organization of a mission. "All we want is the men", he wrote. Who will go? Who? I know of one young man who I think will go, and of whom I can say, I know of none like him for enterprise. If he will go, and we have written him on the subject, we only want another and the mission will be commenced the coming season."

Of course you anticipated that the letter already written was to reach Jason Lee, the young man of enterprise. Lee informed Dr. Fisk of the offer already made to the London Society and added that if the Society did not act by a given time and Dr. Fisk had found no one else for the mission, he would accept. I have already indicated that the missionary society in London was not to act. I have doubts as to Dr. Fisk looking elsewhere for a leader. At last the man and the occasion were brought together and the Oregon mission was to become a fact. It is for another to tell of the far reaching effects of that mission this morning.

Having discussed the influences which made Jason Lee, the limits of my paper have been reached. But perhaps I may be permitted to add a few items that would not be included in any story of his western activities.

The New England conference admitted Lee to its membership and ordained him elder and designated him Missionary to the Flathead Indians. The New Hampshire Conference ordained his nephew Daniel and he accompanied his uncle to Oregon. New England Methodism did not

forsake the youth who adopted it for service. The region contributed much money which made the first trip possible and gave several thousands dollars during the interval between the first and second westward trips. Zion's Herald kept the missionary passion in New England at white heat and so adequately reported the meetings and work of Lee that it is considered one of the two most important sources of the period.

It would not be unusual after sorrow and disappointment had tried his soul that this hero of the Cross should desire the quiet of homeland again. After the successful defense of himself before the Mission Board, Lee turned northward again to rest and recuperate for further work in Oregon. Sorrow and disappointment his soul had been able to defy but his iron constitution could not withstand the attack of internal pain. So "like a hare whom hounds and horns pursue, pants to the place from which at first she flew" Lee too returned to Stanstead, "to die at home at last." After a few months of great pain during the latter weeks of which both lips and pen were still, Lee answered the call to the land where his loved ones awaited him. Few indeed had been his years of life, he was but 42; brief, how very brief had been his ministry, just 12 years. His loved ones laid him to rest in a nearby burial ground where after sixty years the rest of his mortal body was disturbed and his remains were transplanted to the soil whereon he had walked as a prophet of God. Last summer the Vermont Conference with the help of New England Methodism marked the grave and observed the 100th anniversary of the preaching of his farewell sermon.

In the year of this centennial of Lee's service to his church and his God, what real tribute can we bring? Let us not forget that Lee was essentially the product of his environment and its religious temper. Can our modern environment and our modern religion produce another like

unto Lee? We see no forest primeval today, but a settled people, snugly complacent and selfish with emotions carefully guarded lest they show some enthusiasm of spirit. We no longer have protracted meetings, and the educational method has become the accepted process of the church. Can we not let the past challenge us this morning? Would not our best tribute to Lee be the raising up in our churches of men and women who will conquer their own environment as he conquered his, and taking the same tools by which they make self conquest, turn about and conquer the frontiers of their society? Has an easier environment produced a softened spiritual appeal which even softened lives cannot muster energy to answer? Let us therefore arouse our churches again to the heroic for we have the challenge before us, not of taking the gospel into a wilderness but of rescuing the gospel from the wilderness and the wilderness from itself that it may accept the Gospel which it has now hidden. Only such a service will be worthy of our heritage from Jason Lee.