

John A. Lee



John Alexander Lee was born into slavery in Charleston, South Carolina in May of 1848. He was still a boy of 12 when South Carolina seceded from the Union. A year later in 1861, the Civil War's first shots were fired on nearby Fort Sumter, and he retained vivid memories of witnessing the bombardment for the rest of his life.

After the war, he started working on boats along the Carolina coastal waters, but decided to join the Army in 1868. Lee spent a dozen years in the Army, assigned to the Twenty-First Infantry in western posts in Texas and the Dakota Territory, serving in various campaigns during the Indian wars. He mustered out of the service in 1881 at Fort Meade, in what is now South Dakota. In honor of that service, he was later made a member of the National Indian War Veterans organization.

Lee made his way west by oxcart, arriving in Coulson in 1882, just in time for the exuberance of the community's first Independence Day

celebration. Like other residents of Coulson, he quickly moved to the new town of Billings, buying a lot to build a home on. He was one of four Black settlers in the young town that year, all men.

As one of the first settlers, Lee knew all of the characters of Billings. He knew Calamity Jane. He knew Liver-Eating Johnston. He had stories to tell. Years later, it was considered a treat to hear his anecdotes about the early days. A *Gazette* article after his death noted that "his versions of noted events of the pioneer days were different from the accepted accounts, and probably nearer the truth."

Lee never married or had children, but he did have family in Billings. His sister Ruth married Walker Browning and they came to Billings in 1883. Her children and grandchildren adored Lee.

As Billings grew, white society was forming, and men's clubs along with them. The Billings Club started in 1886, and Lee worked there as a steward. He moved to the Midland Club, then the clubs merged into the Billings Commercial Club. (This organization became the forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce.) Lee became an institution at the Commercial Club, serving as steward for forty years. The members of the club called him "Uncle John", and much of the community followed suit.

In 1926, the men of the club threw themselves a "smoker" to honor Lee. The party consisted of bridge games, singing and dancing performances, and a midnight luncheon. One of the featured performers was a champion Charleston dancer from Texas named Ginger Rogers, who was in town for a vaudeville performance. Lee was only invited in to the event held in his honor after the program and meal were done. In regard for his long service to men of the club, he was presented \$500 to visit his childhood

home of Charleston. Lee found Charleston much changed, with few people there he knew or who knew him, and professed himself happy to come back to Billings.

Lee worked at the Billings Commercial Club until he was 80, when he fell ill. His nieces Claudia Bivens and Lulu McCabe cared for him devotedly, but he did not recover. Lee died on October 23, 1928. The men of the Commercial Club offered the clubhouse for the funeral, with Charles M. Bair on the organizing committee. It was an unusual service for the time, with both Black and white residents of the city gathering together. The attendees included all of the Black community, most of the members of the club, fellow members of the Indian Wars Veterans, and valley pioneers. The service was conducted by the Rev. Donahoo, pastor of the Wayman Chapel, with a eulogy delivered by one of the club members. Lee was buried at Mountview Cemetery with full military honors.

Sources:

- *Billings Gazette*, "Life History of Billings Vividly Told by John Lee", July 5, 1925
- *Billings Gazette*, "Pioneer Negro Resident Dies", October 24, 1928
- *Billings Gazette*, "Two Races Join to Honor Negro", October 26, 1928
- "Biographical Facts of John Alexander Lee", undated, Collection of Billings Public Library

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