

Robert E. Lee

Gentlemen Of the Lions Club:-

It is with a great deal of pleasure that I respond to the request for a brief history of Robert E. Lee, the hero of a Lost Cause. He was born on January 19th, 1807 at Stratford in Westmoreland County, Virginia, the son of Lighthorse Harry Lee of Revolutionary war fame and his mother was Matilda Lee, daughter of Phillip L. Lee, of Virginia. The Lees came of a noble family of Englishmen and his Grandfather came to Virginia as Colonial Secretary from the Crown.

In appearance he was of the noblest; tall, exceedingly well proportioned and of most graceful bearing. It was said that when he walked his movements were so graceful as to reflect no effort at all. He had complete mastery over himself and was never known to show anger of any kind, he was never known to use profane language and neither did he use tobacco or intoxicating liquors. He was strong in his friendships and slow to condemn anyone. He was courteous and kind to all alike and during his most exalted moments the humblest private in his army could claim audience with him without embarrassment. During the fierce passions of war his moderation and consideration was most remarkable and during all that intense struggle never an unkind word was spoken of an opponent but on the contrary he always spoke of his opposing generals with kindness and respect. He was neither an enthusiast nor a fanatic. His bravery was unquestioned and his dignity supreme. From the very outset of his military career his zeal and intrepidity was marked and received the highest praise of his commanding general during the Mexican war, General Scott. His high character and self sacrifice in the interest of the cause which he espoused gained the sincere admiration and respect of both friend

and enemy. Personally he had no enemies. The calm dignity with which he met defeat gained for him even the Northern sympathy and respect. When he surrendered his tattered army at Appomatox and road into Richmond to his home he received applause and commendation from both the Northern and Southern soldiers. Even when the spleen and hatred just following the war was at its height the apprehension, imprisonment or even condemnation of Robert E. Lee as a rebel was never even mentioned. He towered far above both victim and victor as the great soldier of a lost cause. No man could receive greater approbation than this. He married Miss Mary Custis, the daughter of Martha Washington and three sons and four daughters were born of this union. He was graduate of West Point and received signal honors at graduation. During his entire attendance upon this great military academy he did not receive a demerit for misconduct, a most unusual circumstance indeed, and one that shows the complete mastery of the man over himself.

A short time after the close of the World War while in the National Capitol on business I was directed by my wife, who was in the Red Cross service at the time and had been during the period of the war, to go into old Virginia and look after some matters for her at Hampton on the famous Hampton Roads. While in that neighborhood I took occasion to visit many places of interest and among others was the old home of Robert E. Lee. As I strolled about those old historic grounds ruminating on the stirring events of the past, feeling the thrill of those almost sacred grounds my mind flashed back over the history of this greatest defensive general of the entire world. I saw him as a mere lad at Northern Neck during the war of 1812 when the warships of Great Britain ravaged the coast of Virginia, indelibly impressing that young mind with the horrors and glories of war. I saw him at West Point, graduating with high honors, and later taking his place in the activities of that early day warfare.

I saw him in Mexico at the side of General Scott winning his spurs, as Captain of engineers. I saw him at Vera Cruz where his ~~ixgixanlyx~~ skill and bravery merited the report of general Scott " I am compeeled to make special mention of Captain Lee. This officer greatly distinguished himself at the siege of Vera Cruz." And again at Cerro Gordo where he led a detachment through a rocky defile and saved the day for the American Army, and was brevetted Major for his action. And then I saw him far in advance of his detachment, totally surrounded by hostile Mexicans lying prone in a briar patch while the enemy slowly withdrew. I saw him at Churubusco and at Contreras was he was again brevetted as Lieutenant Colonel. And I saw him on the field of Chapultepec, wounded and exhausted, carried fainting to the rear and I again read General Scott's report: " Lee is the greatest military genius in America.

And then upon his return I saw him appointed Superintendent of the Great West Point Military Academy, Sept. 1st, 1852. And again I saw him in Texas putting down the savage Comanche uprisings. And I saw him return from there and at the head of the state militia surround and capture John Brown and his band of conspirators at Harper's Ferry.

And then I saw the war clouds of civil strife roll up and saw the struggle going on in the breast of Lee between his loyalty for his nation and his state. I saw him refuse the command of the Northern armies when his state seceded and take his position among the leaders of the South. I saw him in his first engagement at Great Bethel where a force of 1800 infantry put to flight a force of 5000 strong. I saw him appointed to supreme command of the southern forces. I saw him driving McLellen from the attack on Richmond and I saw him on the Rapidan, the Chickahomny and at Fredricksburg. I saw him on the field of bloody Antietam where the "bloody angle" gave evidence of

the most intensive rifle fire ever witnessed, where great trees were cut in twain by leaden bullets. I saw him at Manassas and at Chancellorsville. I saw him cross the Potomac and invest Maryland and then I saw him on the fatful field of ~~Rxxx~~ Gettysburg, where fate and chance combined to defeat the greatest soldier of the Southern cause. I witnessed the magnificent charge of Pickett on Cemetery Hill, saw those gallant five thousand do the "left oblique" in parade ground style and double quick into the very mouth of devastating cannon, and I saw them form their lines, coolly and gallantly, in the very face of the mostly deadly artillery fire ever witnessed, and I saw the auburn haired son of the south, Pickett, go down to his death in the very mouth of opposing cannon.

And then I saw Lee withdraw his forces and recross the Potomac in face of defeat but in orderly style without a loss of a man. And then I saw in his last stand before Richmond fighting everywhere surrounded by the forces of the intrepid Grant with three men to his one. And then I saw him at Appomatox in defeat and disaster, surrounded by countless foes, but calm and dignified, seeking an outlet that could not be ^{had}. And I saw him in the tent of Grant arranging the surrounded of his tattered, hungry troops, offering his sword to the enemy which was as gallantly refused, together with the side arms and property of the officers of his army. And I saw him ride forth to his home in Richmond, sorrowful and sick. And I thought here was a man greater in defeat than most warriors are in victory. A great soldier, a greater man. The hero of a lost cause, indeed, but the most beloved man of a defeated people and the subject of admiration of a victorious nation. And on October 12, 1870, I saw him dead at Lexington, Virginia, mourned by both North and South. What greater tribute could be paid to any man.