

The Rev. Lee is at Home Here

One morning in 1897, an 11-year-old son of a sharecropper who lived on Doby Road south of Fort Mill, was riding a mule he called Barney. He stopped and dismounted. Kneeling, the boy said a short prayer.

Later in life, he said that simple act was the turning point of his life. The Rev. Robert Green Lee said that when he got back on Barney, he was sure he would devote the remainder of his life to the ministry. He was as sure of that as he was that his mother loved him. His parents were David A. and Sarah Elizabeth Bennett Lee.

Robert G. Lee grew up to become one of the nation's best-known evangelists. He was also the first pastor to be elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention for three terms.

The road was not easy. His family was supportive but poor. Lee had to earn his own way through college. Lee managed to hire on with an outfit from Charlotte that had a role in building the Panama Canal. He worked hard and saved his money so he could attend Furman University.

While a college student, Lee peddled newspapers. He was older than most students, a hard worker and determined. He also met and married his wife, Beula Gentry, at Furman. He received a degree from Furman in 1913 at the age of 28. Six years later, he earned a Ph.D. in International Law from Chicago Law School. Over his lifetime he was to receive 10 honorary degrees.

His first church was in Edgefield. After two years there, Lee was pastor at First Baptist Church in Charleston and at First Baptist in New Orleans.

His last church was Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn. He was there 32 years before resigning in 1959. The church congregation numbered more than 9,000 at the time of his retirement. By that time, he had preached on every continent except Antarctica.

Lee was a fundamentalist. He often preached on the topic of the afterlife and believed in a literal Hell. His best known sermon was "Pay Day Some Day." He is said to have delivered the sermon more than 400 times. A movie was based on the sermon, an Old Testament account of Jezebel and the prophet Elijah.

One writer said the sermon, "Pay Day Some Day," was a 20th Century version of Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God."

A skeptic asked Lee if he really believed that there was literal Hell. Lee replied, "I believe Daniel was in a den of real lions, just as my old mother did. I believe that Hell has fire if the Bible says so. But if it is a pool of ice water and is as severe as fire, it might as well be fire."

Lee was the author of more than 20 books. Although the books are serious, in conversation, Lee was quick and witty. A colorful character, he was admired for his ability to "turn a phrase."

When asked by a newspaperman how he felt about the end of prohibition, Lee said, "Legalized booze? You can as easily control a powder keg in Hell." About busybodies he said, "If I were some people's noses, I'd secede from the faces."

Lee, still handsome with bright blue eyes and thick white hair, was 73 years old when he retired from the ministry in 1959. The next year he was invited to address the South Carolina Legislature. They gave him a standing ovation.

Robert G. Lee died in July 1978 at the age of 91 and is buried in Memphis.

Louise Pettus is a local historian. This monthly article about the history of Fort Mill is presented by the Fort Mill Downtown Association. For more information, check out www.fortmilledowntown.com.