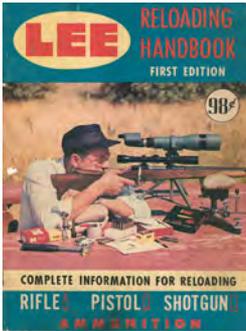


# Richard James Lee



 Our Dad, Richard James Lee, slept away September 22. Our family and the reloading world have him to thank for Lee Precision, Inc. Dad got his start in the corner of a one car garage in Glendale, Wisconsin. The business has grown to nearly two acres under roof and has provided jobs for many hundreds of employees, some of them still at Lee Precision since Dad's retirement in 1992.

When my mother ever spoke to others about what my father did for a living, she unhesitatingly replied, "He is an inventor." For as long as I can remember, Dad's hero was Thomas Edison. When I was still living at home, he showed me his childhood invention book. One of his earliest and most interesting inventions was in 1942 at the tender young age of twelve, he designed and built a rotary lawn mower and it was an electric one to boot. The prototype used Grandma Lee's electric vacuum motor and a wooden blade with steel cutting edges.



Dad said he drifted from job to job early in his career, some jobs lasting but a day. When he decided to settle down and marry, he apprenticed and became a journeyman tool & die maker. Even the tool and die-making career was short lived as he started Lee Engineering around the time of the birth of his third child. He never again worked for another employer, and for the rest of his life, was able to do the thing he enjoyed the most; inventing and manufacturing things. Although he never again worked for an employer, he often told me, "When you are the boss, everyone is your boss." Parents with children will know exactly what he meant.

Dad was not only a gifted thinker, he also had unlimited ability to do things with his hands. No stopped clock was safe from Dad as he could repair anything. He always had his pocketknife and it was always sharp. I would marvel at what he could carve from a piece of wood.

Late in life he took up painting. He watched a series on PBS on painting with a wide brush and quickly became skilled in this technique. Shortly after, he switched to oil painting with a fine brush and produced art with a quality that rivals the works that can be seen in an art gallery.

When he tore his Achilles tendon, he had to wear an ankle cast that prevented him from swimming. Dad, the inventor, made a removable cast that he would allow him to take his daily swim. His doctor told this story for years.



He never formally competed, but he was an accomplished trap shooter, shot a perfect score in center fire handgun (equivalent in difficulty to a perfect bowling game), and was a marksman with a rifle. He would wow my childhood friends by shooting coins out of the air with a 22 rifle or dispatching bumblebees with a pellet pistol from the lawn chair!

In 1998, six years after Dad retired from the day-to-day operations of the business, he required heart bypass surgery. I was visiting with him just before surgery and he assured me his “bucket list” was complete. By today’s standards it was a simple one:

- 1) Be able to eat ice cream every day
- 2) Swim in the wintertime
- 3) Fly in an airplane (unfathomable that he would actually pilot one)

In 1963, Dad had four children and a new house in the country. He began flight training, and as time and finances permitted, earned his private pilots license in a few years.

The new house had an attached garage that served as the machine shop. It sported a 1918 Brown & Sharpe automatic screw machine and a couple of other pieces of shop equipment. The house was an original design by Dad, and artistically enhanced by an architect. It was a split-level home that allowed his reloading tool business to prosper on the lower level and his family of eventually seven lived comfortably upstairs. The “Lee Loader” business quickly outgrew the house and moved to an old woolen mill in downtown Hartford.

It’s 1968 and the last item on Dad’s bucket list was about to be fulfilled. He added an indoor swimming pool to the house and just like the Clampett’s, he now had “the cement pond.” Swimming in the winter was now a reality. Dad swam in the pool daily up until the last few months of his life.

Instead of taking over the garage space to escape Wisconsin winters, he remodeled the machine shop/garage, his office and Lee Loader production area into the recreation room for the kids. His whole life he never parked his car inside. That space was for the countless birthday parties Mom threw for the kids. With the pool and the recreation room, our friends were never at a loss for things to do at our house.



In the same year of 1968, he made what was probably one of the most difficult decisions he ever made; to purchase a brand new airplane. N5561J a Piper Cherokee Six, a big, easy to fly airplane with seating for seven, the whole family. Keeping in mind dad grew up poor during the depression, he was always frugal with his money. I am sure on reflection, he felt it was the best decision he ever made.

Dad loved traveling; in the earlier years our family traveled the country in a station wagon with bunk beds Dad designed. We traveled to the national parks before they were as popular as they are today. When we traveled by car, we often camped in the car. With the new airplane, we could make our destination in a day and spend a night at a motel.

About this time he also became a gentleman farmer; fencing and creating a pasture for the girl’s horses.

On a personal note: He also bought a 10-horsepower Sears garden tractor. This 10-year-old thought this was just about the coolest piece of “heavy machinery” a kid could use. I couldn’t wait for the grass to grow. All this happened in 1968.

Five children, bucket list complete, the next 50 years were the most fantastic bonus years anyone could have.



Flying was Dad’s favorite pastime. He never needed much of an excuse to take a plane ride. Dad saw the entire country by air, with the family and often times by himself. Flying became so routine for the kids, it ceased to be an adventure and Dad did a lot of solo flying. He had over 4,100 hours in his logbooks (that’s a lot, like 2 years of full time work), and flew more than 30 different planes, autogyros and even got a helicopter rating at age 68. For medical reasons, Dad was no longer able to fly. So he took up motorcycling again, and built the only enclosed Gold Wing in the United States. He traveled the country coast to coast and on some summers put on over 14,000 miles. One of his favorite trips was the Pacific Coast Hwy.



Dad was always a father figure. Some dad’s just try to be their children’s friends and our Dad was always our father first. He insisted we eat as a family and we ate on time, every time. We dressed appropriately for school; no questions asked. We wouldn’t think of asking Dad if we could have an underage beer party at the house, breaking curfew, forget about it. Dad always had time for the kids. It could be a band concert, piano recital, showing horses at the County Fair, building model airplanes, or working on the go-cart.

You know what? It worked.

I recall an anniversary party at the Linden Inn. I think all the kids and grandchildren were there and Dad was off to the side. He had a tear in his eye. I asked what’s wrong? “Nothing, all these perfect children, every one of them, every digit, every toe, perfect.”

Thanks Dad.

Son John.

