

# Robert E. Lee 4th invades North with Virginia's bourbon

By ISAAC REHERT

With a name like his, and living in the Old Dominion of Virginia, Robert E. Lee 4th is continually causing double-takes as he presents his card and goes quietly about his business promoting the sale of a gentlemanly Virginia bourbon.

Yes, he is the great-grandson of the Robert E. Lee.

No, he doesn't sport a beard or ride a horse; he's never had nor coveted a military career, he's not related to the steamboat of the same name; he hasn't even lived in the South for very long.

He's a 52-year-old clean-shaven man with an oval face and horn-rims, and he was wearing a natty brown tweed jacket and a button-down collar and matching tie the day he sat in a booth at a downtown hotel talking about what it has meant bearing the same name as the South's greatest war hero.

He grew up in New York, where his father, George Bolling Lee, had gone to Columbia University to study medicine and then stayed on to practice. (Robert E. Lee 3d was an uncle.)

His only contacts with the South during his childhood were during summer vacations, when he and his sister would visit an old family farm at Annandale, in Fairfax county.

The first Robert E. Lee (who was practically a teetotaler), although the son of Light Horse Harry Lee, a hero of the Revolution, was never well-fixed financially. After the Civil War, he found himself unemployed and practically penniless.

He accepted the post of president of Washington College in Lexington, Va., later to become Washington and Lee University; and he built a home there, with a wrap-around porch for Mrs. Lee, who was an invalid.

The Custis-Lee mansion in Arlington, which came to his family through his wife, Mary Anne Randolph Custis, was his home before the war. But it was confiscated by the Union armies; and since he was never granted amnesty within his lifetime, he never returned to it.

At his death, he had little to bequeath to his descendants besides his sterling reputation.

What isn't very well known is that President Robert E. Lee of W & L founded a journalism school there—no one is certain why.

And journalism wormed its way into the Lee family's stock of occupations. Robert 4th, after graduation from his great-grandfather's institution, found himself working as advertising manager of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

As a student at W & L, Robert 4th

couldn't help hearing a lot about his great-grandfather—about the traditions of the South and expectations from its great grandsons and all that.

"But," he says, "Dr. G. Francis Gaines, who was then president, was understanding. He sympathized with my desire to be a private person, and he kept people off my back."

In San Francisco, when he moved there, the name Lee ceased to mean a thing because the city is full of Chinese and the name Lee out there is about as common as Smith is in the East.

But the amount of privacy a genuine great-grandson bearing the name Robert E. Lee could achieve was bound to be limited.

In 1936, when he was only 12, Dallas celebrated its centennial and it was unthinkable that that occasion should pass without the presence of some descendants of the general.

Even the President of the United States felt constrained to attend that one. Robert recalls how the Lee family traveled to Dallas as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's entourage. He was just a boy, but it made quite an impression.

Then, as the centennial of the Civil War began, the invitations multiplied.

There was one at Fort Sumter, memorializing the opening of the war.

And there was one in Richmond celebrating the day that Lee took over command of the Confederate armies. That time Robert 4th laid a wreath at the monument to General Lee (who is buried in the Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University.)

During the San Francisco centennial, which lasted four years, the magic name elicited so many invitations that he couldn't begin keeping up. "If I had, I'd have never gotten around to doing my job at the *Chronicle*."

The most colorful of the memorial affairs was at Gettysburg in 1963, when governors from all the states participating in the great battle were invited. Governor William Scranton of Pennsylvania was host and there was a big dinner and a reception and he took part in an afternoon parade.

The most moving was at Appomattox, where the surrender of the Confederacy was re-enacted. For that occasion, they also invited Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's grandson, who had been a West Pointer, and was then an official in the Park Service.

Two years ago, when President Ford signed the resolution posthumously granting United States citizenship to General Lee, Robert 4th attended that ceremony,



Robert E. Lee 4th in Virginia's only legal distillery

held at the Lee mansion in Arlington. He credited Senator Harry Byrd with responsibility for that gesture.

Reared in New York, and with a career in the West, Robert E. Lee 4th might have severed his Virginia roots forever, were it not for that Annandale family farm.

It was while staying there that his sister, Mary, met and married Smith Bowman, one of two brothers who own the only commercial distillery in the state.

In 1970, when they decided they needed

someone experienced in promotion and advertising to push their product in the middle Atlantic states, they offered the job to Robert E. Lee 4th.

That's how come he moved his wife and two children back to the East—this time back into the South.

They live in McLean, almost suburban Washington, which isn't exactly mint julep-under-the-magnolias country. But the move did bring expatriation to an end, putting the Lees back in the state of Virginia.