

JOHN L. LEE

“Herculean Nimrod and Father of the Big Game Hunters”

John Lee is certainly one of the most remarkable, and flamboyant characters of Zimbabwe's very early, in fact, pre-pioneer history.

John was born in Somerset East in the Cape on July 10th 1827 and was christened Johannes Lodewickus Lee. His name alluded to an Afrikaans heritage and his mother, Maria Magdalena Catharina du Preez, was a third-cousin of Paul Kruger, the third President of the South African Republic and the very personification of Afrikanerdom.

Yet it was a mixed marriage, as John's father was an archetypical Englishman by the name of Charles Twiggins Lee. Charles had been a Captain in the British Royal Navy, which was how he had got to Cape Town in the first place. Johannes, or 'John' as he became universally known, was brought up in a very Afrikaans environment and by the time he left school in his early teens to join the military, he could hardly speak English at all.



A photograph of John Lee taken in 1913. He is sitting next to an 1869 oil painting by Thomas Baines of him shooting elephants from horseback in Mangwe. John is holding his original 'Six-to-the-pound' muzzle-loading elephant gun.

From a very early age John was a strong and athletic child and first distinguished himself at the age of just eight years old, when he swam across the Great Fish River to rescue a British officer stranded on the Xhosa side during the early stages of the Frontier Wars.¹

In August 1846, at the age of just nineteen, John Lee Married Catharina Maria Aletta van Wyk, and within just nine months she had the first of several children. John was not there for the birth and within weeks of their marriage had been posted north to fight in the re-surging 'Frontier Wars' where he served with distinction. Between 1846 and 1851 he fought in the Sixth, the Seventh (which was known as the War of the Axe) and the Eighth Xhosa Wars.

During the sixth Xhosa War in late 1846 John's swimming again made him famous when he took a bet to swim across the broad, flooded Orange River. Not only did he make it, but he returned with a cask of brandy! Apparently this feat earned him a 'speckled heifer' from a skeptical Mr. Remer de Wenaar.²

But these wars took their toll on John Lee – and his marriage.

According to various newspaper articles in the South African archives, he sustained a series of injuries, which Will Jackson (who is an Associate Professor in Imperial History at the University of Leeds) notes were "testament to his sacrifice and his formidable endurance."³ These injuries included a battle-axe wound to the back of his head that he sustained in 1848 and being skewered in the thigh with an assegai in 1851.

For a few years John tried to integrate himself back into family life, but while he had been away fighting his marriage had soured and it wasn't long before John and Catharina were formally divorced. Unwelcome at home and needing a distraction John decided to move to the Transvaal and start a new life. There he met and married Louisa du Preez who was from the tiny village of Lady Grey in the Eastern Cape. Louisa, or 'Maatjie' as John endearingly referred to her, also had several children while they were living in Lady Grey.⁴

¹ 'No Country for Old Men: The Life of John Lee and the Problem of the Aged Pioneer' by Will Jackson. Published by Oxford University Press. History Workshop Journal, Issue 87, Spring 2019.

² 'Aged Elephant Hunter' article published in the Transvaal Chronicle on October 27th 1913.

³ 'No Country for Old Men: The Life of John Lee and the Problem of the Aged Pioneer' by Will Jackson. Published by Oxford University Press. History Workshop Journal, Issue 87, Spring 2019.

⁴ 'The Plumtree Papers' by Mary Clarke, published by the Plumtree Foundation in 1983. There is some debate as to whether Louisa's maiden name was du Preez or van Wyk, as it appears on some genealogy websites. I believe by the reliability of the sources that it was actually du Preez.



The peak of 'Lee's Castle,' the kopjie in the southern Matopos which was named in honour of John Lee by a Ndebele tribal chief.

Picture by Ervin Skalamera. © Ervin Skalamera Photography.

But war was to get in the way again and in early 1958 John fought in the First Basuto War under both British and Boer leaders. According to Jeanie Boggie during both the Basuto War and the Xhosa campaigns John was credited with many instances of exceptional bravery that earned him the reputation of being a tough and fearless leader.⁵

These characteristics were to become a hallmark of the rest of John's long life.

From a very early age John was fascinated with the vast unexplored interior of Africa that lay north of the Transvaal. He was enticed by the stories and rumours he heard of its great potential and wealth. After returning from the Basuto War towards the end of 1858 John needed to find a source of income to finance his growing family. With few other options he decided to head north up into the 'Great Unknown' and see what he could discover up there.

By Christmas he had made it up into south-western Zimbabwe where he was one of the very first white hunters to have got so far north into the domain of the feared Ndebele. Presenting himself at the King's court John was granted permission to hunt elephants in the Mangwe area.

⁵ 'First Steps in Civilizing Rhodesia, Being an Account of the Experiences of the Earliest White Settlers - Men, Women and Children - in Southern and Northern Rhodesia.' by Jeannie M. Boggie. Published by Philpott & Collins (1940). ASIN: B01BXRAQDO.

After a very successful hunt he returned to Johannesburg in early 1859 with a wealth of ivory and skins, along with many tales of high adventure.

Between 1861 and 1865 John did several more hunting trips up into Matabeleland and with each trip he became ever more infatuated by the remarkable country.

John was a remarkable linguist whose preferred language was Dutch. He could also speak both Xhosa and Zulu, and on his hunting trips into Matabeleland he worked hard at become fluent in the Sindebele dialect. This, no doubt, earned him the respect and trust of Mzilikazi and the other Ndebele Chieftains and Ndunas. In fact the whole tribal leaders were fascinated by this remarkable white man who know so much about the world, was a skilled diplomat and yet who accepted and respected their own culture and 'ways.'

This trust and esteem of the Ndebele leadership is reflected in the story of the naming of Nunji Hill. One day while John was travelling through the southern Matopos foothills with one of the tribal chiefs, he was saying how beautiful the country was. The elder turned to John and asked, "Umkosa, do you have a kopje named after you?" "No." John replied. "Then this one will be named after you." the man said pointing up at the large rocky outcrop they were riding past.⁶

In Sindebele the hill was called 'Nunji' although over time it has been known by various other descriptive names including, 'Woman with a baby on her back' and 'the Three Sisters.' Its English name, 'Lee's Castle' was first coined by the German explorer Eduard Mohr and some of the other visitors staying in Mangwe while on their way into the interior during the early months of 1869.⁷

John Lee's love of the country grew with every trip he made, until, eventually, he resolved to move to Matabeleland permanently. During the hunting season of 1866 John asked Mzilikazi, the King of the Matabele, for permission to bring his family into the country and settle permanently in the Mangwe river valley. Mzilikazi, who had got to know John well, granted him permission to move into the country. This made John Lee and his family the very first permanent white settlers in Zimbabwe.

Many wonder what would have convinced John's wife Louisa that it was a good idea to move into 'darkest Africa' where stories of cannibals, savage wild animals and deadly diseases abounded. Her condition to move was that John first build her and her family a house. And so the first 'Lee's House' was built.

⁶ Personal recollections of Mrs. Lily Campbell, John Lee's granddaughter, as told to Edmund Campbell.

⁷ 'To the Victoria Falls of the Zambesi' by Eduard Mohr. published by Books of Rhodesia (1973). ASIN: B0006CVTAM.



A colour sketch by the painter Thomas Baines showing construction work commencing on John Lee's second Mangwe house. The handwritten description says; 'Sawing up the first log (Mr. S. Edwards assisting us). Lee's Farm, Mangwe River, the Castle in the distance, 8 February 1870.'

It was a pole and dagga thatched house which according to Thomas Baines was 'near a rivulet which seemed to be much better supplied with water than the Mangwe of which it was a tributary.' As soon as the house was complete Louisa and her eight children, Sarah, Rolf, Anna, Maria, Catherine, Jan, Hans and Karl, all made the long perilous trek north in their two ox-drawn covered-wagons.

Although the remains of this first house are now lost beneath the waters of the Mangwe dam we are told that it had several rooms and a deep veranda. The thatch kept it warm in winter and the thick sun-baked mud kept it cool in summer. It was placed in the centre of a large tract of land that the Matabele King had granted to John, which Baines described as being 'between hills of granite crowned by weather-worn blocks looking like titanic masonry and thickly clad upon the sides with thorn and timberwood with bright red aloes and chandelier-like euphorbias.' The scale of Mzilikazi's gifting of this land was clearly a reflection of the trust and friendship that had been established between the two, very different men.

The deal was that from Lee's Castle near Mangwe Pass, the distance a horse could ride for an hour and a quarter in the direction of each point of the compass determined the four corners of John Lee's estate. According to the historian Tim Tanser apparently, "Lee brought in a magnificent charger from the South African Republic and under the watchful eye of one of Mzilikazi's ndunas, set out to make his boundaries." Although John Lee did not do the actual riding himself. John appointed his youngest son Karl Lee (or 'Carel' as he was known in Afrikaans) who was much smaller and lighter than John to do the actual riding. Bearing this heavy responsibility the young boy was able to encompass an area of over two hundred square miles for the new family estate.

The generosity of this deal was extremely unusual, and according to Tanser, "It is clear that first Mzilikazi, and then Lobengula, had implicit trust and faith in John Lee whom they appointed as their agent to protect their country and to vet all the traders, prospectors and hunters who sought concessions from the Matabele King."⁸

In 1868 Mzilikazi, who was an old man, died. Unfortunately the appointment of his successor was complicated. The majority of tribal chiefs offered the crown to Lobengula. But as he was one of Mzilikazi's sons from an inferior wife several sub-clans objected and so a period of bitter political vying ensued under the auspices of an elderly Regent Nduna Mncumbata and his advisors.

During this time of turmoil very few white hunters or travellers were allowed into Matabeleland. Consequently they began to accumulate at Mangwe which became so crowded it was described as a 'town on wheels.' By 1869 the Mangwe settlement had grown into a 'lively European society.' Edward Mohr, who was involved in the naming of Lee's Castle, writing in the Northern Goldfields Diaries went into detail of life at Lee's Farm; 'John Lee and his family were living in the large thatched house on the Mangwe from which there was a very pretty view embracing the river, the tents of the encampment on the opposite bank and the grazing flocks and herds.'⁹ Over time that encampment would grow to include a blacksmith and a tannery.

As this little metropolis continued to grow it became the main point of entry into the country. Consequently it is hardly surprising that all of the African maps that were published between 1875 and 1904 marked the location of Lee's Farm (or Lee's Castle, as it became known), as one of the most important places in the country.

One of Lee's regular visitors at the time was the explorer, botanist and artist Thomas Baines who became a close friend of John and Louisa Lee and stayed with them in Mangwe for

⁸ 'The Lee Family of Mangwe' by T.F.M. Tanser as published in the Heritage of Zimbabwe Number 14, 1995.

⁹ 'The Plumtree Papers' by Mary Clarke, published by the Plumtree Foundation in 1983.



The earliest map of the Zimbabwe area showing 'Lee's Farm.'

This is a German map of the Matabele Kingdom published in 1875, less than ten years after John Lee settled in Mangwe. The scale of this map is huge and takes in almost the entire area of the country of Zimbabwe as we now know it. Victoria Falls is in the top left corner, Harare (or at least 'Hartley Hill') is in the top right corner and the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans are in the bottom left corner. Neither Harare nor Bulawayo were established as yet.

extended periods of time. During this time Baines gained a deep respect and appreciation for John's diverse skills, describing the well-built hunter as 'a man of cool, clear judgement and determination. He takes a personal interest in our course and we all think it is best to listen to his advice. He is well known as a daring elephant hunter, and I am painting a picture of one of his adventures, which I think of presenting to him, as I am sure his assistance will be quite deserving of such an acknowledgement.'¹⁰ This painting, seen in the photograph above, was for many years on display in the Pretoria City Hall. Its whereabouts are now unknown, though, who knows, it could still be there, lost and gathering dust in a back office or storage room somewhere...

Baines was a prolific painter and on one visit, which extended into several months he ran out of canvasses, so with permission of his hosts he painted murals all over the interior walls of Lee's house instead. By the time he eventually departed almost every inch of the house was covered in the most incredible paintings chronicling his stay and the adventures they had had. Louisa was so relieved when Thomas left as she didn't really like his painting style and couldn't wait to

¹⁰ The Oppenheimer's series of 'The Northern Goldfields Diaries of Thomas Baines 1869 - 1872'

whitewash them all away to get the walls back to a clean pure white. For generations to come John's descendants have lamented what a house full of original Baines' murals would be worth today!¹¹

In his memoirs Thomas Baines wrote, "Mr. Lee, who not only perfectly understood the language and customs of the Matabele but was privileged to hunt and reside in the South Western district, had long enjoyed the confidence of the late chieftan Mzilikazi and was generally regarded as his agent in all business affairs with white men."¹²

Although there were many 'business affairs,' most of John Lee's personal wealth was accumulated through ivory and apparently he still holds the world record for having shot the most elephants in a single day. His record was thirteen in a particularly busy day back in 1864. Although wildly unfashionable today, the ivory trade was a very big and lucrative industry back in the mid-nineteenth century. Lee's extraordinary hunting skills were corroborated by such credible authorities as Frederick Courtney Selous, who said that John Lee not only earned his reputation 'amongst his own people' but "gained for himself the honoured title of "Umkosa" (meaning 'Lord') amongst the Matabele."¹³

In addition to being an accomplished hunter and tracker, Lee was also involved in quite profitable business ventures. In 1869 he was appointed as Governor of the Tati Goldfields and was offered the position of Consul for the Transvaal Government at the Matabele Court (which he declined). While in early 1870 Thomas Baines himself offered to appoint Lee as an agent for the South African Gold Fields Exploration Company, which Lee accepted, along with the generous salary of two hundred pounds per annum that came with it.

While this appointment could have led to a conflict of interest with his commitment to the Ndebele King, Lee carefully balanced both responsibilities, and according to Tanser, "subsequent investigations confirm that Lee did not jeopardise his position with the Matabele and continued to remain extremely vigilant on their behalf."¹⁴

According to Will Jackson, "Throughout Baines's book, Lee appears as a mediating force for the advance of British imperialism, as he negotiated between parties of gold-seeking Europeans and the Ndebele kings. Other contemporary accounts paint Lee in a similar light. Fellow

¹¹ Personal recollections of Mrs. Lily Campbell, John Lee's granddaughter, as told to Alan Brough.

¹² 'The Gold Regions of South Eastern Africa' by Thomas Baines, published in 1877 by Edward Stanford, Charing Cross, London.

¹³ As quoted in the October 27th 1913 edition of the Transvaal Chronicle.

¹⁴ 'The Lee Family of Mangwe' by T.F.M. Tanser as published in the Heritage of Zimbabwe Number 14, 1995.



A somewhat dilapidated illustration of Lee's House from Edward Peter Mathers 1895 book 'Zambesia, England's El Dorado in Africa.'

elephant hunter, William 'Old Bill' Finaughty, described Lee as 'an advisor, or rather the Foreign Minister, to both Mzilikazi and Lobenguela.'¹⁵

John Lee was also a successful farmer and according to Mohr, 'employed himself in cultivating fields in which he planted wheat and potatoes and subsequently added almond and peach trees...' While in his paper on the Lee Family Tanser credits John Lee with being a successful farmer who experimented with growing citrus, quince and other fruit on the estate. Yet, above all else, Lee was a cattle man. Over time John developed a vast herd, trading them with the passers-by and his stock was reputed to be particularly good, especially for highly sought-after trek oxen.

'By Christmas 1869 Lee's Farm was thronged with visitors: hunters, prospectors and traders all waiting for the Matabele to name the new king. Reading descriptions of the comings and going between Tati and the Mangwe makes the old wagon road sound like a modern highway.'¹⁶

With so many visitors, and with the accumulated wealth to support it, at the beginning of 1870 John decided to build the family a bigger, grander house. It was also a pole and dagga construction, described by Baines as being fifty foot long and sixteen wide, containing a

¹⁵ 'No Country for Old Men: The Life of John Lee and the Problem of the Aged Pioneer' by Will Jackson. Published by Oxford University Press. History Workshop Journal, Issue 87, Spring 2019.

¹⁶ 'The Plumtree Papers' by Mary Clarke, published by the Plumtree Foundation in 1983.

reception room, dining room and two bedrooms at each end and a long veranda at the front and back. The walls were made of stout mopani poles packed side-by-side and plastered with lime, all topped with a thick thatched roof. There was also a stone animal pen at the back door where the livestock could be corralled at night.

Although he had a fine new house and was building up significant wealth from his elephant hunting, his cattle ranching and the Gold Fields Company, 1870 also came with tragedy.

The political wranglings to determine Mzilikazi's successor finally came to a head and it was decided that the only way it could be resolved was by the 'arbitration of the assegai.' In other words it was a fight to the death between Lobengula and his picked impis and the contingent of opposing rebels. Lobengula and his courage won the battle which led to his unanimous selection as the new king. John Lee was informed of the decision on January 10th 1870.

Three months later the coronation of Lobengula took place. It was an extremely lavish affair attended by ten thousand warriors in full war costume with hundreds of cattle being slaughtered for the feast. John Lee was a guest of honour, but as Louisa was about to give birth to their ninth child, he was obliged to attend the celebration at Mhlanhlandlela, one of the Ndebele's military garrisons, alone.

During the extended celebrations Lobengula reconfirmed John's standing within the Royal Court. He wrote a proclamation to 'My Trusted friend, John Lee of Mangwe River' in which he stated, "I, Lobengula, Hereditary and elected King of the Matabele nation, knowing the esteem and friendship with which you were regarded by my late father, Mzilikazi, do hereby confirm you in the offices and privileges you held during his lifetime, and do also appoint you to serve under myself..." John Lee had been accepted and embraced as a Matabele.

But, tragically, while he was away both Louisa and the new baby died during childbirth.

Before John was able to get back home the children had buried their mother with the baby, fleetingly named Abraham, in a little family cemetery near the homestead. It was a devastating blow to the family.

By the end of the year the family had recovered and on November 30th 1870 they celebrated the marriage of their eldest daughter Sarah Suysielya to David Jakobs. It was a lavish affair and the Priest from Hope Fountain Mission traveled to Mangwe to marry the young couple and hold services for the many Dutch families who were on the farm. 'During the forenoon these people gathered and exemporised a dance, or rather a succession of dances, which lasted till late in the evening. Half a dozen of the guests who played very well on the concertina took turns on the



*A photograph of Louisa Lee's iron-crossed grave in Mangwe taken sometime in the 1950's.
© Alexandre Jacobus Heynes.*

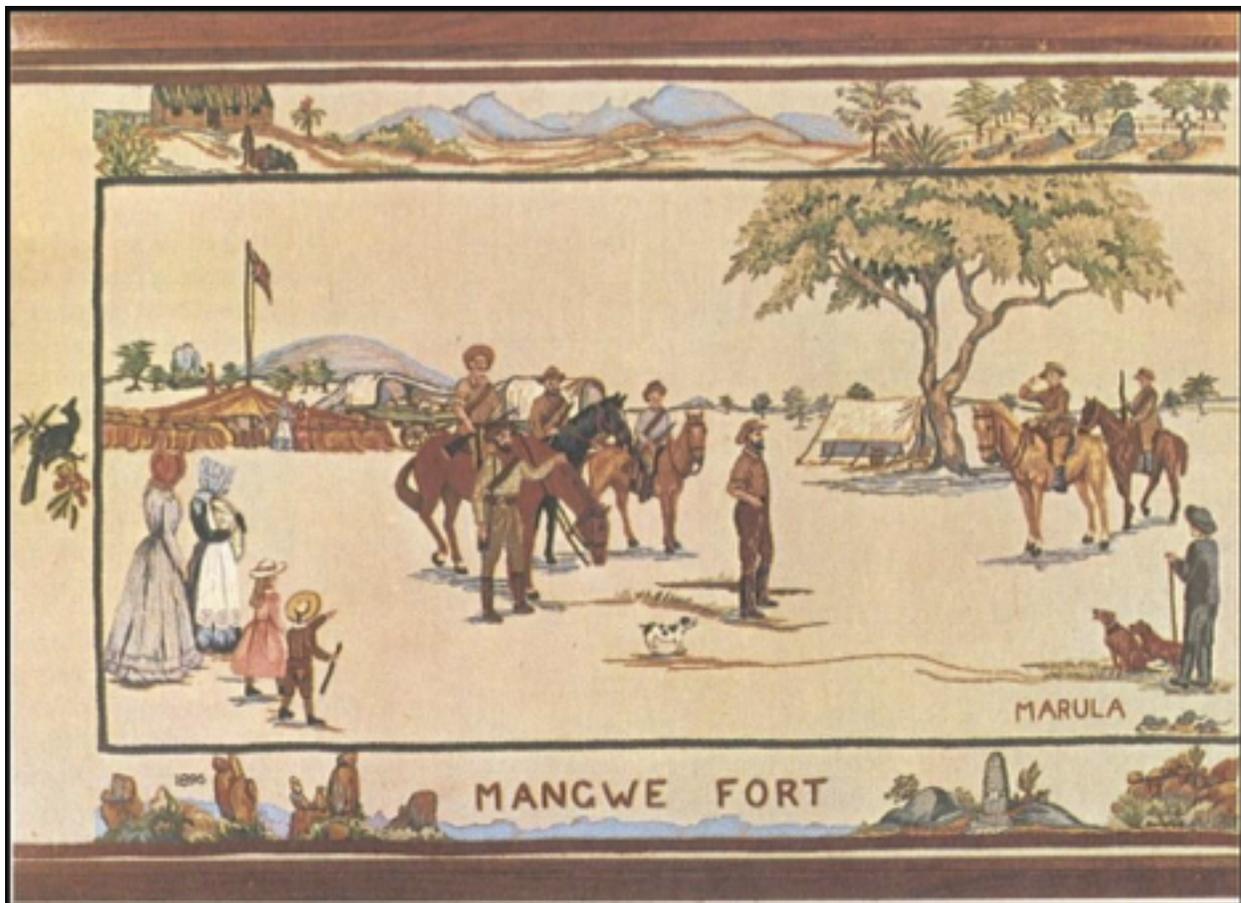
instrument' which was accompanied by fusillades of gunfire in salute to the newly weds.¹⁷ And so John's children grew-up and began leaving the homestead in Mangwe.

Hans who was only twelve at the time, also did his own growing-up when a huge black-maned lion managed to get into the livestock enclosure and started to attack the family's cattle and goats. John was away at the King's Court and Hans was alone at the Farm, yet without a second thought he grabbed his rifle and shot the lion at point-blank range.¹⁸

When King Lobengula heard the news of this young 'lion killer' he had the boy brought to him in Bulawayo. Stating that the boy had proven himself a man, Lobengula said that from that day forth Hans had the right to hunt anywhere he chose in Matabeleland and rewarded him with his own estate. This time the deal was that Hans could claim domain over any and all land he could circumnavigate on a horse in one day. Again the fittest horse was selected and a vast tract of land was added to the already expansive family holding.

¹⁷ 'The Northern Goldfields Diaries' by Thomas Baines.

¹⁸ 'The Plumtree Papers' by Mary Clarke, published by the Plumtree Foundation in 1983.



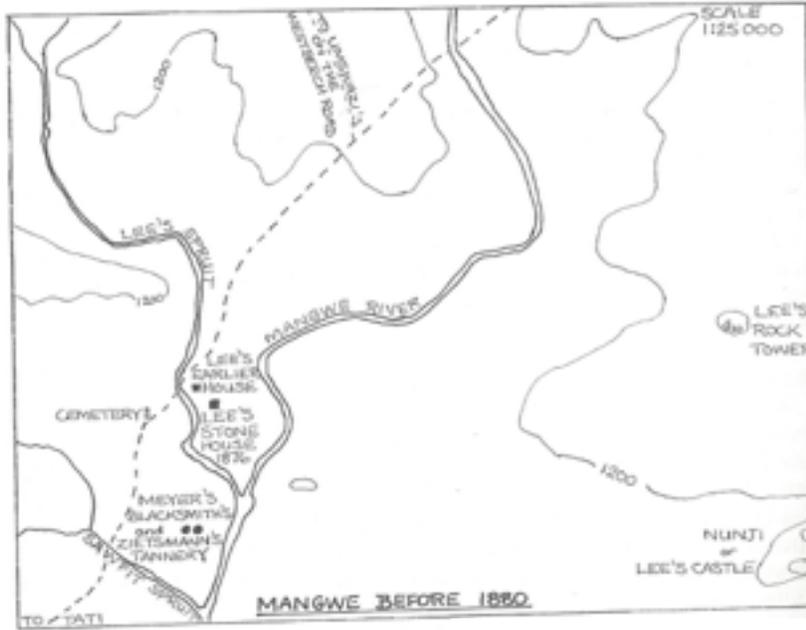
In the 1950's and early 1960's the various Rhodesian Women Institutes across the country stitched the country's National Tapestry charting the country's pioneer history. This panel which shows the Mangwe Fort includes John Lee's house in the top left corner and Louisa Lee's grave in the top right corner. The one hundred foot tapestry was displayed in the Rhodesian Parliamentary Chambers until the early 1980's.

This lion incident made John realise that with his duties to the new King and his extended hunting safaris he was in no position to look after the daily needs of his children so he hired 'a succession of housekeepers, one of whom he married.'¹⁹ His new wife was Jacoba van Rooyen, sister of the famous hunter Cornelius van Rooyen. She is credited with 'showing no favouritism for any of the children, but did her best, with only the bible from which to teach, to educate them and even to teach them to play musical instruments.'²⁰

But for all her efforts, she did not love John. According to Edward Tabler, it wasn't long before Jacoba "ran off with a transport rider."

¹⁹ 'Pioneers of Rhodesia' by Edward C. Tabler published in *Africana Notes and News*, Volume 20, Number 2, September 1972.

²⁰ 'The Lee Family of Mangwe' by T.F.M. Tanser as published in the *Heritage of Zimbabwe* Number 14, 1995.



*An early map of Mangwe from the 'Plumtree Papers' based on Baines' and Bohr's maps from the time.
© The Plumtree Foundation.*

In 1876 John married again. His fourth wife was Hester Susanna van Rooyen. She was more than thirty years younger than him and was younger than John's first five children. But this was a much happier marriage, and Hester remained faithful to John right to the very end.

John and Hester initially lived in the 'second house' but it was six years old and the pole and dagga structure was in need of significant repair. So after they were married John decided to build a larger and more ambitious stone

walled house with proper glass windows. It would become known as 'Lee's Castle' after the huge square-faced rock kopjie that loomed over it.

According to Brian Brown, "This house was built on a piece of rising ground that formed an island of safety and protection where all were hospitably received. Here many rested and prepared for trips into the interior. Visitors were not accommodated in the house, but in the huts and rondavels around it."²¹

The artist Frank Oats who stayed at Mangwe on his way to see the Victoria Falls added to the description, writing that, "Lee came to meet me and asked me in. He is a red-faced man and his wife is very young. His house has an air of comfort and some luxury about it, owing to some handsome leopard karosses on the couch and chairs..." While a Jesuit priest by the name of Father Berghegge who also stayed in the sprawling complex described it as "a magnificent property in the midst of wonderful landscape, framed by hills, rocks, forests and valleys."

With his fourth wife, Lee's third house was a much happier household, as described by William Finaughty who often stayed at the estate, "Jan' (which was John's Dutch name) had built a comfortable house and they certainly were having a happy time. The fun consisted of hearing the old man talk. He would tell the most circumstantial yarns, full of adventure and humour, by

²¹ 'Mangwe Pass Memorial' by Brian Brown, published in the Plumtree School magazine The Prunitian in February 1955.

the hour together, and to listen to him you would think he had left no elephants in the country. At the same time his son Hans would be whispering to me that his father was too frightened to go near an elephant, that he had never shot one and was never likely to shoot one. But the gravity of the old man in telling adventures and the bursts of Homeric laughter that invariably followed their recital kept the house in a constant state of merriment.”²²

Although John was getting old he still managed to have five more children with Hester, which certainly kept the new stone house full and very active.

Then in late 1876 John’s third wife Jacoba van Rooyen returned to the estate. Her second marriage had degenerated into abuse and she had fled. But being unable to support herself in the fledgling country she had nowhere else to turn and, fearing for her life, she asked John for help. Although John was now happily remarried, he had always appreciated how well Jacoba had looked after his children. Consequently he agreed to allow her to stay on the farm. Obviously not in the main homestead but in one of the ‘huts and rondavels around it.’

Although Hester was no relation to Jacoba, having the same surname caused much confusion, as well as a fair amount of malicious speculation. In this regard, as there was now two ‘Mrs. Lee’s’, who were both van Rooyen’s living on the estate gave rise to a rumour that John had become a polygamist who had taken two wives. John allowed the perception as it endeared him towards the other Matabele Ndunas who saw it as a sign that he was embracing and adopting their tribal culture and traditions.

The scandal was solidified in 1878 when Jacoba had a baby daughter who everyone presumed was John’s. Considering he had just married to Hester, and by all accounts was very happy in the marriage, it is unlikely that John was the father of Jacoba baby girl. In his defence it should also be remembered that there was a steady stream of attractive, unattached men passing through the Mangwe encampment. Whatever the truth, John did raise the baby in the household with his other children, effectively adopting her.

This act of kindness certainly didn’t help his cause. According to Frederick Barber who wrote in 1877, “John Lee was a great friend of Lobengula and had been received into the tribe as a subject. To show how he appreciated this honour, had adopted the custom of the land by taking to his bosom two wives, Dutch women both! A scandal that called forth much comment from the many Dutch hunters and their wives. Some of the hunters had no wives and they were naturally much annoyed, and resented the uxorious John indulging himself with the luxury of two, while they had none.”²³

²² ‘Recollections of William Finaughty elephant hunter’ by William Finaughty published in 1916.

²³ ‘Zambezia and Matabeleland in the Seventies’ by T. H. Barber, published by Chatto & Windus. ISBN: 0798105615.



The sandstone Dutch Reformed Church in the village of Lady Grey that John Lee paid for. All the houses in the village were then built to face the church which is now a South African National Monument.

Picture by Hendrik van den Berg licensed under the terms of the cc-by-3.0.

According to Mary Clarke this was ‘doubtless a much exaggerated version of the actual set-up but gives an indication of the complications of John Lee’s personal life. The old man had become something of a legend in his own lifetime as almost every passer-by had something to report.’

This was largely petty jealousy and for several years John continued to prosper, brushing aside the simmering rumours. But fortune was turning against him and by the early 1880’s there was a growing number of people – especially some of the missionaries – who resented the power and influence he held in the Ndebele Royal Court.

The Missionaries wanted Lee to be more forceful in both securing land for them and in converting the tribe. But John was not convinced of either the sincerity of many of the missionaries or the willingness of the Ndebele to abandon their own gods. ‘In 1882 Father Prestage visited John Lee at Mangwe and was told by Lee that they were wasting their time trying to convert the people until such time as the Matabele had been defeated in battle.’²⁴ The

²⁴ ‘The Plumtree Papers’ by Mary Clarke, published by the Plumtree Foundation in 1983.

old man rationalised that this was needed to demonstrate that the whiteman's God had greater power than the tribe's traditional gods.

The church viewed this as belligerence and with all the piety and venom they could muster the missionaries loudly and virulently condemned John Lee as a polygamist. The severity of this accusation and the damage it did to his reputation haunted John for the rest of his life. However this brush with the clergy did not put John off the principle of Christianity and Sundays at Lee's Castle remained days of prayer, reading the bible and singing hymns.

Unfortunately John's health was beginning to deteriorate and he started to suffer repeated bouts of fever which were taking their toll. Eventually his weakened state got the better of him and in 1884 John decided to move back to South Africa for health reasons, leaving the farm in the hands of his trusted manager Frederick Greef (or 'Frikkie' as he was known). During those years John and Hester moved back to the village of Lady Grey where John had lived with Louisa back in the early 1860's. John had always loved the place with its beautiful setting in the Witteberg mountains near the Lesotho border. There the damp, cool climate gave John the respite from the fever that he was needing. While living there, from his amassed fortune, John paid for the building of the local Dutch Reformed Church which still dominates the town to this day.

In 1889 having regained his strength John returned to the farm in Mangwe. But things had changed.

Frikkie had not worked out so well and the farm was in a serious state of neglect. Although, as John's son Hans had recently married Frikkie's daughter Martha, John chose not to cause a family rift and simply tried to pick up the pieces. Grateful to have been spared John's wrath Frikkie decided to become a transport rider and left the area.

Things were not working out so well on the political front either. Rhodes was restlessly driving his vision of British imperial dominance from 'Cape to Cairo' and was pushing hard to colonise Zimbabwe. The British government supported the plan and had authorised Rhodes' British South Africa Company (the BSAC) to administer the territory under the Royal Charter that Queen Victoria had signed earlier in 1889. These moves significantly curtailed John's influence and authority, which had waned over the four years that he had been away convalescing.

In 1890, under the authority of his Royal Charter, Cecil Rhodes sent the Pioneer Column into Zimbabwe. Lee was approached to guide the column through the country but declined as he "liked and admired the Matabele" and felt this commission would have been a serious conflict of interest. It was a snub that neither Rhodes nor the BSAC leadership would forget. In the end the group of settlers were guided by John's friend Frederick Courtney Selous under the protection of a well armed contingent of the British South Africa Police. Passing through Matabeleland they moved up into Shona territory where they established Fort Salisbury in mid-September 1890.

The Shona, who had long been victims of Ndebele raiding parties and 'tribute collectors' saw the opportunity to gain protection from the obviously powerful white authority that had moved in. To avoid clashes with the BSAC Lobengula directed his raiding parties away from their traditional targets in Mashonaland. But this heightened tension with the young impi commanders and fuelled simmering mistrust within the tribe towards all whites generally.

While Lobengula was glad to have his old friend and mentor, Umkosa Lee, back, both men knew that war clouds were gathering.

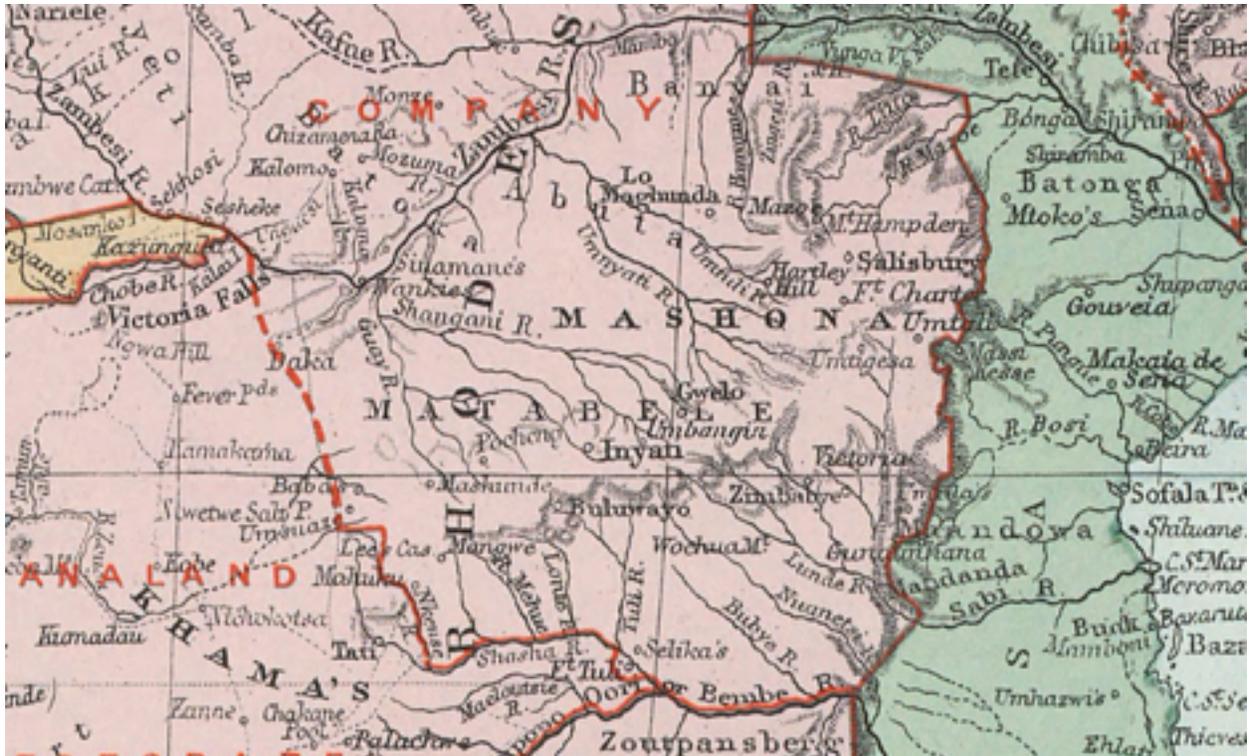
Discussing the spiralling situation, Lobengula asked John directly if he would fight the Matabele once 'the soldiers came.' "No." John replied, "You have protected me all these years and I will not fight against you." Lobengula then advised John to leave for his own protection as he felt he would not be able to control all of his warriors once hostilities broke out. John was compromised. On principle he would not abandon Lobengula, yet he knew the Ndebele would never be able to prevail against the BSAC and their new Maxim machine-guns. A massacre was inevitable.

Over the next year as the tension continued to ramp up John was again asked to help negotiate with Lobengula on behalf of the British authorities. Again he refused. When pressed he categorically stated that he would not take up arms against the Matabele and would not support those that did. He was now a marked man. Under pressure from all sides John finally decided it would be better to once again leave the country and as soon as his baby daughter Jacomina Cornelia had been born and was strong enough to travel he reluctantly moved the family back to South Africa.

In October 1893 the First Matabele War broke out. As the British had very few interpreters they gave John one last chance to redeem himself and offered him the chance to come back and serve the Chartered Company as a guide and interpreter. Yet again he turned them down, citing his loyalty to Lobengula and the Matabele.

His principled stand did not matter as overwhelming military might did not really need guides or interpreters anyway. Just four months later, in January 1894 Lobengula was dead and the Matabele had been roundly defeated. Thousands of their bravest assegai-wielding warriors had been mown down by the deadly Maxim's and the Spirit of the Nation had been thoroughly broken.

With the tribal authority having been crushed the BSAC were quick to cancel John Lee's land rights and impounded all his land and remaining property. According to local history, "Lee refused to co-operate against the Matabele and, after the occupation, his lands were



The 1904 Stanford Map of Africa, which was published ten years after the Matabele Rebellion still shows 'Lee's Cas.' being an abbreviation for Lee's Castle in Mangwe to the south-west of Bulwayo.

confiscated. The incident reflects more honour upon Lee, who was supporting his friends and benefactors, than on the administration.”²⁵

John did have some accumulated wealth remaining in South Africa though and, at least initially, he was able to survive 'in exile.' However the political situation in South Africa between the two Boer Wars was hardly much better, and this was not helped by the failed Jameson Raid of 1895.

When the Second Boer War broke out in 1899 John was, once again, seriously conflicted. He was torn between his loyalty and understanding of British imperial interests as a result of his father's lineage, and his full immersion in Afrikaans culture and language through his mother's.

Straddling cultures seems to have been a hallmark of John's life. Being half Boer and half British he was able to objectively appreciate the benefits and strengths of each. And by being a White man immersed in a Black nation he was able to mediate and educate both sides on the culture, ethics and objectives of each. Even within his role at the Ndebele Royal Court John was

²⁵ 'The Guide To The Khami, Naletale, and Dhlo Dhlo Ruins and Other Antiquities Near Bulwayo' published in 1965.

By 1912 John, who was now living with Hester in the Transvaal town of Potchefstroom, had nothing left and at the age of eighty-five he was in need of serious financial support. According to Will Jackson, “He had been offered a place at the Krugersdorp pauper house earlier that year but was unable ‘to conciliate himself with the idea of being treated as a pauper’. Instead, Lee intended to raise funds for his subsistence by writing and publishing his memoirs.”²⁷

This decision to actively change his status from pauper to author reflects John’s strong sense of self-pride and his conviction of the value and worth of his life achievements. Anything less would have been out of character for this remarkable, principled adventurer.

Unfortunately though the British establishment, who had won the Boer War and consolidated their grip on power in South Africa, did not particularly like or support John. They repeatedly turned down his requests for either a Pioneer Pension or for his land in Mangwe to be returned to him.

I believe there were several reasons for this. The main, and most influential one, was the British South Africa Company’s view that John Lee was an enemy sympathiser and sell-out who had not actually supported British expansion into Rhodesia, as the territory had become known. Onto this was added the missionary-fuelled rumours that John was a polygamist, which, at the time, was almost as bad. There was also a concern about the credibility of Lee’s claims going back to a time when there was little or no reliable record or third-party verification of anyone’s claims. Finally there was fear that if they granted John the pension he needed that it would set a very expensive precedent for hundreds of other similar claims.

In his defence Lee presented himself as “the archetypal British pioneer hero, a figure described against the backdrop of the South African frontier, whose life not only bore testament to the genius of an imperial race but had in more instrumental terms secured the southern African hinterland for the British Empire.”²⁸ It is almost certain that John did not believe in the ‘genius of an imperial race,’ though he did believe that he had secured the southern African hinterland.

While the new post-Boer War South African government was reluctant to support John in his final years, there were many who did support him, and who saw John as a true pioneering hero. Petitions were raised and funds were set up to enable John to continue to live in dignity.

The list of people who personally provided John Lee with financial support is impressive and speaks to the connections, influence and friendships he had at the highest levels of both the British and South African political establishments. One of his most generous supporters was

²⁷ ‘No Country for Old Men: The Life of John Lee and the Problem of the Aged Pioneer’ by Will Jackson. Published by Oxford University Press. History Workshop Journal, Issue 87, Spring 2019.

²⁸ Ibid.

A South African Hero.



This illustration represents Mr. JOHN L. LEE, of Potchefstroom, at 85 years of age, holding his "Six-to-the-lb." grooved ~~brooch~~ ^{musket} loading elephant gun.

Mr. Lee was the son of a distinguished naval officer, and was born in the District of Somerset East in 1827.

On his right is an oil-painting by Thomas Baines, F.R.G.S., taken from life on July 3rd. 1869. Mr. Lee is seen shooting elephants from horseback.

This Herculean Nimrod, the father of big game hunters, holds the world's record for having shot 13 elephants in a single day. near the Dry River, Matabeleland, at the end of May, 1864.

Mr. Lee is also a veteran of the Kaffrarian and Basuto Wars, and still bears the scars of battle-axe and assegai wounds.

He fought under Sir Harry Smith, Lieut-Gen. Cathcart, Col. Somerset and Col. Hare, President Boshof, and others.

The front cover of a leaflet published in 1912 promoting John Lee as "a South African Hero, a Herculean Nimrod and the father of big game hunters."

Viscount Gladstone who was the Governor-General of the Union of South Africa from 1910 to 1914. He also received cash donations from the Mayors of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria and Krugersdorp, the Auditor General, the Minister of Education, five Supreme Court Judges including the Judge-President, an Admiral, a Lieutenant-General, a Colonel and several 'Sirs'.

Through these charitable donations John Lee was able to live self-sufficiently until his death in August 1915. Although he was able to 'maintain his dignity' and avoid officially becoming a pauper, John's last few years were meagre at best. Three years later, in March 1918, Hester, who had remained in Potchefstroom, died at the age of sixty. There is no record of how she managed to sustain herself for those last few years.

It was a sad end for such a remarkable man who not only embraced, but actively advocated for, and defended, an African tribe during the peak of frantic colonial expansion.

John Lodewickus Lee left his heirs with nothing but his legacy and now lies buried in an unmarked municipal grave in a corner of a Potchefstroom public cemetery.

Alan Brough