

# THE GENTLE GIANT

## John Lee (1811-1919)

For 54 uninterrupted years, from 1865 until his death in 1919, John Lee, a man whose heart matched his impressive physical size, carried the keys at the Lanark County Jail. In that time nearly 4,000 inmates passed under his supervision, and a great many of those found their lives changed for the better by the experience.

Lee was born in Bathurst Township in 1842, the eldest son of Richard Lee (1811-1904) and Mary McCann (1821-1897)<sup>1</sup>. He was named for his grandfather, Private John Lee (1777-1849), of the 2nd Battalion, 89th Regiment of Foot (Royal Irish Fusiliers), a native of County Wexford, Ireland. In 1812 Private Lee had taken his discharge in Ireland<sup>2</sup> and emigrated to Canada the following year with his wife, Rose Ann Wall (1787-1874), of County Wicklow, and two infant sons. Delayed at Quebec City by events of the War of 1812, the family eventually took up land at the Perth Military Settlement in 1816, first in Drummond Township and then at Bathurst Township C-5/L-16(W).<sup>3</sup>

Immigrant John Lee was a Protestant but his wife, Rose Ann, was a Catholic. In addition to three sons born in Ireland<sup>4</sup>, they had five more children<sup>5</sup> born in Bathurst Township. Their first son born in Canada, Richard, grew up on the Bathurst Township farm and married Mary Ellen McCann (1821-1897). The eldest of Richard and Mary's seven children, John, was apprenticed to cooper John Thornton (1816-1889) at Perth but, at age 24, he took a different path. On July 18, 1865, Sheriff James V. Thompson (1812-1912) appointed him to replace James Dick (1840-1909) as Turnkey at the Lanark County Jail.<sup>6</sup>

The job of 'Turnkey' was the number-two post at the jail. Overall direction of the institution was the responsibility of the 'Governor', a position held by Robert Kellock (1806-1883) at the time of Lee's appointment. That year the jail staff also included 'Matron' Alicia McDonnell-Kellock (1810-1878), the Governor's wife, charged with oversight of the female inmates, and 'Jail Surgeon', Dr. John Nichol Jr. (1841-1870), a local doctor employed on an on-call basis.

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<sup>1</sup> Their children were: John (1842-1919), James (b.1845), Ellen (1847-1910), Mary (1849-1938), Frances (1852-1937), Edward (1854-1935), Michael (1857-1901), Sarah Anne (1861-1923).

<sup>2</sup> Most, if not all, of Private John Lee's time with the 89th Foot was spent policing Ireland in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion.

<sup>3</sup> The immigration story of the Lee family of County Wexford, Ireland, and Bathurst Township, Lanark County can be found elsewhere on this website at <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/lee-history.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> One son had remained behind in Ireland with his grandparents.

<sup>5</sup> Their children were: William (1804-1879), Edward (1813-1903), Richard (1813-1904), John (b.1815), Frances (1818-1886), Anne (1822-1887), James (b.1823), Daniel (1826-1892).

<sup>6</sup> Herein the modern spelling of 'jail' is used except in direct quotes from period documents. During the tenure of Turnkey John Lee, the word *jail* and *jailer* were always spelled *gaol* and *gaoler*, according to British usage. The word came into English in two forms, *jaiole* from Old French and *gayole* from Anglo-Norman French *gaole*, surviving in the spelling *gaol*, originally pronounced with a hard *g*, as in *goat*. Traditionally the spelling has been *gaol* in Britain and *jail* in the United States. Both *gaol/gaoler* and *jail/jailer* are pronounced the same way.

Prisoners and other inmates seldom saw the Jail Governor, who was primarily occupied with the bureaucratic and financial affairs of the institution<sup>7</sup>. For those behind bars, the face of Lanark County Jail was the Turnkey, the man responsible for all day-to-day operations from soup to security.



*Former Lanark County Jail, Beckwith Street, Perth*

Designed by architect Henry Horsey (1830-1911) of Kingston and constructed in 1862-1863 by Perth contractor Samuel Bothwell (1825-c1900), the County Jail, facing Beckwith Street East, is a forbidding two-storey Palladian-styled stone fortress. It was designed to accommodate 24 male and female inmates in 18 cells, with four wards, two yards and an attached residence for the Turnkey and his family. The jail included permanent gallows and was linked to the adjoining Court House by both above and below ground passages.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Governor's annual statement of accounts to County Council in 1892 reported that the cost of food for each prisoner per day amounted to 7 cents (*Perth Courier*, February 5, 1892). The 1897 annual report was proud to show that the daily cost of feeding a prisoner had been brought down to 5 7/8 cents (*Perth Courier*, February 4, 1898).

<sup>8</sup> The jail closed in October 1994 due to the cost of renovation and repair required to meet modern occupational health and safety standards.

The jail accommodated both prisoners awaiting trial and those convicted and sentenced to short sentences. Longer sentences were served at the Provincial Penitentiary in Kingston (opened in 1835). At any given time, the cells usually housed about a dozen inmates but, in March of 1910 the *Perth Courier* noted that “*Turnkey Lee has 25 men on the County stone pile*”, an unusually large number for the facility. Through the decades straddling the turn of the 20th century, the Jail Governor’s annual reports to County Council show that, on average, inmates broke 20 to 25 cords<sup>9</sup> of stone each year.

In the day of John Lee, the Lanark County lock-up was usually a busy place, with at least half the cells occupied and prisoners busy on the rock pile, but on Tuesday, September 29, 1914, a rare moment passed at jail.

*For the first time in 50 years there was not a prisoner confined in the Lanark County Gaol ... the last inmate having been given his discharged that morning; and Turnkey Lee was shaking hands with himself over his unique experience, after 49 years of service. The early afternoon train brought in a couple of new prisoners from Smiths Falls, however, so Tuesday’s elation was short-lived.*<sup>10</sup>

Up to 1903, when Lanark County opened its House of Industry<sup>11</sup> at Perth, the Jail was also home to the indigent, aged, infirm, mentally ill and intellectually handicapped who, without family or friend, were unable to meet their own needs and had been (grudgingly) taken into County care. Some of these lived at the jail for years, while others sheltered there only briefly.

*Death in Gaol - Last Wednesday [October 4, 1876] an old woman named Sela Klyne, confined in the Perth Gaol for vagrancy was found dead on the cell floor in a pool of blood. Her death was caused by the rupture of some kind of abscess in the lungs or throat.*<sup>12</sup>

*Died in Gaol - On Friday night last week [December 30, 1892] about eight o’clock, an old man named Thomas Lynch was brought in to the Perth gaol in a dying condition. He had been staying with a man named Haley in North Elmsley, and got sick while stopping there, and Haley had him committed to the gaol to get rid of him. The poor old man could not walk from the sleigh to the gaol but was carried into his brief prison home by Mr. Lee, Turnkey. He died about six o’clock next morning.*<sup>13</sup>

There was also frequently an inmate or two determined by a Magistrate to be an ‘insane lunatic’ and deemed a threat to themselves or others. These unfortunates often spent many months or even years in the jail as they awaited a place at the overcrowded Provincial Lunatic Asylum at Toronto, opened in 1850, or later at the Rockwood Lunatic Asylum at Kingston, opened in 1878. In truth, care at Toronto or Kingston was little better, and sometimes worse, than that provided by John Lee at the County Jail.

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<sup>9</sup> A cord of stone equaled 12 cubic feet (0.34 cubic meter) or 7.5 tons.

<sup>10</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 2, 1914.

<sup>11</sup> AKA the ‘Poor House’ or the ‘County Farm’, now Lanark Lodge.

<sup>12</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 6, 1876.

<sup>13</sup> *Perth Courier*, January 6, 1893.

*Yesterday morning, John Lee, Turnkey at the Perth Gaol, left here with two insane prisoners for Rockwood Asylum, Kingston, in his charge. These unfortunates were Thomas Glasco and Patrick Bowes of Almonte.*<sup>14</sup>

*For the Asylum – On Monday morning last, Mr., John Lee, Turnkey of the Perth Jail, left here with two lunatics in his care, bound for Rockwood Asylum. The unfortunates were Edward Lee of Bathurst and a young man named Ferguson of Dalhousie.*<sup>15</sup>

As Turnkey, Lee was also frequently deputized to provide additional security when the Sheriff transported criminal convicts from Perth to Kingston Penitentiary.<sup>16</sup>

*Today Deputy Sheriff and Turnkey Lee of Lanark brought to the city two prisoners, William McQuade, sentenced to three years in the penitentiary for stealing sheep and James Ferguson, sentenced to two years for the same offense. Two years ago, McQuade served a term in the penitentiary for horse stealing.*<sup>17</sup>

John Lee was, by nature, well suited in every way to the post of Turnkey, not least by his size. He stood over six feet tall, “*erect as a pine tree*”<sup>18</sup> and weighed over 250 pounds (114 Kg).

*With a giant frame, the courage of a lion, and a spirit of resolution to equal these, he was quite competent and willing to deal with the worst case of criminals who came under his charge ...*<sup>19</sup>

As a young man he was an athlete, a... “*district champion amateur runner, the half-mile being his favourite distance*”.<sup>20</sup> At the 1867 Queen’s Birthday sports competition, he came away with no less than three first places, prompting the *Perth Courier* to comment that,

*It must be gratifying to the friends of law and order to know that this champion of the racecourse holds the position of Turnkey in the County Boarding House, from which institution it is utterly useless for any prisoner to attempt to escape; for if pursued by the swift-footed Lee, like Davy Crockett’s ‘gone coon’<sup>21</sup> he might as well give up.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Perth Courier*, November 24, 1876.

<sup>15</sup> *Perth Courier*, April 20, 1877.

<sup>16</sup> Between 1882 and 1901 John Lee probably took the opportunity of these trips to Kingston Penitentiary to visit his youngest brother, Michael Lee (1857-1901), who was a prisoner there. At Napanee on March 28, 1882, Michael Lee had split the skull of his former fiancé Maggie Howie (1859-1882). Convicted of ‘murder with intent’ and sentenced to death that November, he was later ruled insane, and his sentence was commuted to life in prison. After nearly 20 years of incarceration, Michael Lee died in Kingston Penitentiary in 1901.

<sup>17</sup> *Kingston News*, November 4, 1898.

<sup>18</sup> *Perth Courier*, December 29, 1922.

<sup>19</sup> *Perth Courier*, September 12, 1919.

<sup>20</sup> *Perth Courier*, July 16, 1915.

<sup>21</sup> ‘*Gone coon*’ is an expression synonymous with the phrase ‘*barking up the wrong tree*’, both meaning to be pursuing a mistaken or misguided line of thought or course of action.

<sup>22</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 31, 1867.

But the sum total of John Lee was much greater than his size and speed. If ever there was a 'gentle giant', it was John Lee.

*Of a highly sociable nature, courteous manner, intelligent, and an easy conversationalist ... his kindly manner toward the helpless in his keeping, and the imbeciles awaiting their turn at the asylums, made the Perth Gaol a model one in Ontario and a desirable rendezvous for those unfortunates who had no other home.*

When Lee marked 50 years as Turnkey at the Lanark County Jail in 1915, as prisoners gathered for the evening meal, a delegate of their number rose and presented a formal address to mark the occasion.

*We the prisoners of Lanark County Gaol, Perth, desire, on the occasion of the golden anniversary of your connection with this institution as Turnkey, to express our gratitude to you for your extreme kindness to each, notwithstanding the fact that not a few of the 4,000 you have taken care of during your half century of office have scarce merited your generous treatment.*

*We can only conclude that the impression made by you on such a large number is due to your striking personality which has been a strong incentive to those deviating from the path of rectitude to live better lives.*

*We particularly wish to thank you for the sympathy extended to the friends of those present, as well as to the friends of those who have been here in years prior. You have surely done much toward lessening the burden of their hearts.*

*It has been a long journey, Mr. Lee, and undoubtedly your heart has been touched many times by some of the acts, as an officer of the law, you have been called upon to perform. We sincerely hope you may be spared for many years to come in the service of your God, King, and country.<sup>23</sup>*

It is unlikely that such sentiments had ever before (or since) been expressed anywhere by prisoners to their jailer. Lee responded with thanks for their "kind wishes" and took the opportunity to express the hope that "those to whom he was speaking would, when released, lead better lives". Commenting upon Lee's 'Golden Anniversary' as Turnkey, the *Perth Courier* heartily endorsed the praise offered by the prisoners.

*During his long term of office, he was able to enforce the necessary discipline without, in any case, lessening his sympathy for those who came under his charge. Indeed, it is to his credit that in a multitude of cases he was able, by his natural kindness and by words of encouragement, to help those who were close to the down-and-out line back to a better way of living. No fewer than 3,814 prisoners have passed under his charge.<sup>24</sup>*

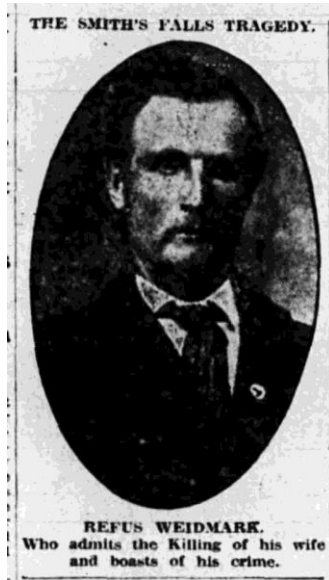
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<sup>23</sup> *Perth Courier*, July 23, 1915.

<sup>24</sup> *Perth Courier*, July 16, 1915.



When the jail inmates of 1915 observed in their address, that Lee's heart must have been "touched many times by some of the acts, as an officer of the law, [he was] called upon to perform", they doubtless had in mind his role in the Weedmark execution of five years earlier.



On December 14, 1910, John Lee stood as one of the eight official witnesses<sup>25</sup> at the hanging of Rufus Weedmark (1857-1910) of Smiths Falls. Weedmark had murdered his wife and from the time of his arrest in April 1910 until his execution in December, he was in the custody of John Lee at the Lanark County Jail. By 1910 there had been no public hangings in Canada for over 40 years, but it was still the custom to invite representatives of the press to attend. Lanark County Sheriff Daniel George McMartin (1844-1923), however, barred the press and, despite howls of protest and a last minute attempt to secure an injunction allowing reporters to attend, only John Lee and seven other official witnesses were in the room when Weedmark dropped through the scaffold trap.<sup>26</sup> Weedmark's was the third and last execution to take place at Perth and the only one carried out during Lee's tenure at the jail.<sup>27</sup>

On rare occasion Lee's kindness and generosity could be exploited or lead him to turn his back for a moment too long.

*Sometime last week a man named John Hammond of Drummond, near Innisville, became affected in his mind, and on Tuesday of last week was placed in Perth gaol for temporary safe keeping. On Monday, another inmate of the gaol named Smith, a reliable prisoner, was allowed the use of a razor of the Turnkey to shave himself, with strict instructions not to allow it to go from his possession. After finishing the shaving process, Smith took the razor into his cell and hid it under his bed, thinking it perfectly safe there. He then returned to the corridor.*

*It seems that Hammond, with the cunning of insanity, had been quietly watching Smith's doings all the time, and upon his retiring from the cell, went there himself, hunted up the razor, and made two or three gashes to his throat. He was then discovered and seized and the gaol Surgeon, Dr. Kellock, called in. The wounds were dressed, and found not to be dangerous, and Hammond is now recovering.<sup>28</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> The witnesses were - Sheriff Daniel George McMartin (1844-1923), Jail Governor William Henry Grant (1837-1914), Turnkey John Lee, Guard George Terrance Kerr (1876-1937), Guard Archibald Graham, Reverend Canon William Jeffreys Muckleston (1849-1930), Reverend R. G. Bundall and Jail Surgeon Dr. Adelbert Edward Hanna (1863-1918). The hangman was Arthur Ellis (1864-1938). Officially Arthur Ellis (real name Arthur English) was the Assistant Hangman of Canada, the official hangman being John Robert Radcliffe (1856-1911). In 1910, however, Radcliffe was rapidly succumbing to alcohol related disease and unable to perform his function. He died two months later in February 1911.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Easby, 1829; Francis Beare, 1851; Rufus Weedmark, 1910.

<sup>27</sup> See *Ultimate Penalty of the Law* <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/neighbour/shaw-ultimate-penalty-web.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 23, 1884.

In 1866, the same year he took up the Turnkey appointment, John Lee married Mary Ann McDonagh (1847-1908). In their quarters at the jail, John and Mary raised seven sons and three daughters born between 1868 and 1886.<sup>29</sup>

Mary Lee became Jail Matron in 1881 and, in addition to her own family, assumed responsibility for the care of female inmates - prisoners, indigent residents and the insane. Mary Lee proved to be as gracious and caring as her husband. In fact, she was so uncommonly diligent and kind that, when Lanark County finally established the House of Industry, several of the indigent women under her care refused to move. Among these was 'Granny' Jamieson.<sup>30</sup>

*Mrs. Gavin Jamieson (familiarily known as 'Granny') died in the County Jail on Sunday last. She was committed to the jail about 14 years ago when the County had no other place for the care of its aged and poor, and when the House of Industry had been prepared for the reception of indigent poor, Mrs. Jamieson begged and pleaded so hard with those in charge of the new institution to be permitted to remain to the end of her days in the jail under the maternal and cheerful care of Mrs. John Lee, jail Matron, that the officials did not have it in their hearts to refuse her plea. On being told that her wish was to be respected the old lady was very thankful and a load of care seemed to be lifted off her mind. This was in 1903 and the deceased spent two very happy years since then.*

*She was about 87 years of age and was quite blind and helpless in a number of things. She was very much attached to Mrs. Lee, and the kind-hearted ladies of the town who visited her at the jail do not wonder at her love for the Matron, for Mrs. Lee was very patient and kind with her for the 14 years of her residence in the jail.<sup>31</sup>*

As the *Courier* predicated, being fleet of foot did indeed stand John Lee in good stead. On a mid-winter evening shortly after he became Turnkey, a prisoner managed to escape confinement, but within a block or two of the jail Lee ran him down and dragged him back to his cell. The years take their toll, however, and in 1912 the only prisoner to ever escape John Lee's custody made his get-away. At 70 years of age, Lee was no longer fast enough to collar the runaway.

*Bob Bryon, committed from Smiths Falls on a charge of vagrancy, escaped from the jail on Monday, and as yet is at large. He had only five days to serve when he went away. Bryon was acting as cook and went out through the kitchen door and over the stone wall when the turnkey, Mr. Lee, was absent. It was a hot day, and there being no iron door on the kitchen, Mr. Lee, through the goodness of his heart, left the regular door open for ventilation, and while he was away a moment or two, Bryon beat it, got his clothes from another prisoner, and got away. He was seen in Brockville on Tuesday. This is the first time a prisoner has gotten away in Mr. Lee's time in nearly half a century as Turnkey ...<sup>32</sup>*

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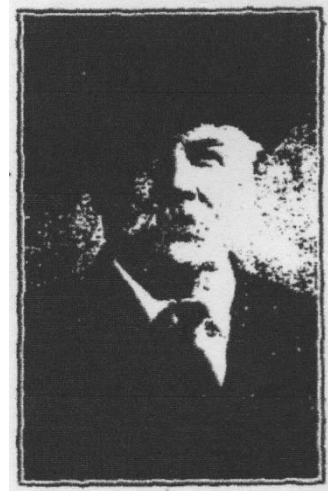
<sup>29</sup> Their children were: Mary Evelyn (1868-1945), Patrick John (1868-1919), William (b.1872), Alfred Frederick (1873-1933), Edith Elizabeth (1877-1946), Richard Stanton (1877-1952), Gertrude Ann (1877-1920), James Ernest (1882-1923). Daniel (1884-1965), Joseph Ewart (1886-1968).

<sup>30</sup> Rose Ann Dobie (1821-1905) who had married Gavin Jamieson (1794-1879) at Perth in October 1866.

<sup>31</sup> Perth *Courier*, May 26, 1905.

<sup>32</sup> Perth *Courier*, June 28, 1912. John Lee may have been fortunate in that Byron just slipped away. In 1929 four prisoners at the Perth Jail overpowered Turnkey John Palmer, beat him, seized his keys, robbed him, tied and gagged him, locked him in a cell and made their escape. Two of the men were recaptured at Sharbot Lake within 48 hours, the other two were arrested in Halifax a month later.

Beyond the jail walls, John Lee was an engaged and active member of his community. During the early days of the 1866 Fenian emergency he served in Thomas Scott's (1841-1915) Perth Light Infantry Company and later in Captain Edmund Spillman's (c1841-1924) Perth Rifle Company. From 1871 he was, for many years, Captain of the Fountain Fire Company, and in the 1880s and 1890s he was manager of the 42nd Battalion Band. Lee also served for three years as representative of the Roman Catholic Separate School on the Board of the Perth Collegiate Institute.



John Lee (1842-1919)

John Lee dedicated himself to his job at the County Jail, to a fault, and that commitment was shamefully presumed upon and exploited by the County of Lanark for nearly a half century. In 1865 Lee was hired at an annual salary of \$300. Fifty years later his salary had been increased by only \$150. Moreover,

*In all that time he has never been absent from his post of duty except when incapacitated by illness, and in all that time has never had a holiday although regulations allow him two weeks holidays in each year. At the rate of \$14 per week that the County would be obliged to pay a substitute, he has saved the County \$1,372 in the period of 48 years, through him not having taken the holidays which he was entitled to.*<sup>33</sup>

Jail Governor William Grant had fallen ill in 1913 and died in 1914, and for over a year John Lee served as acting Governor as well as Turnkey. This circumstance brought the matter of Lee's compensation into focus. At its meeting of June 1914 County Council finally went some way toward setting the situation right when it nearly doubled Lee's salary, increasing it from \$450 to \$800. Lee would, however, reap the County's largess for only five years.

John Lee died on August 31, 1919 at the age of 77, still on the job, having served as Turnkey of the Lanark County Jail continuously for 54 years. Seriously overweight at 275 pounds, it was speculated that the heart attack that killed him was brought on by "his daily work of lifting his heavy frame up the various gaol stairs in the course of his duties".<sup>34</sup>

During his more than five decades as Turnkey, Lee had served under three Jail Governors: Robert Kellock (1806-1883), William Henry Grant (1837-1914) and John Oates (1857-1947). He had also served under three County Sheriffs: James Thompson (1812-1912), William McGarry (1833-1910), George D. McMartin (1844-1923).

His obituary, like so many prior testimonies, lauded his kindness and generosity in a most difficult of job.

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<sup>33</sup> Perth Courier, June 26, 1914.

<sup>34</sup> Perth Courier, September 12, 1919.



*His was a difficult and onerous task, especially in days gone by, when the gaol was the common home alike of criminals, helpless people and the insane, but with his big heart none of these ever left the gaol, neither for the grave or to worldly freedom, without, to the last, bearing only goodwill to their guard and caretaker.<sup>35</sup>*

- **Ron W. Shaw (2021)**

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.