

The incredible 'Miss Lee' In a continuing story



Photo courtesy James Crabbe
Mabel Lee at home—1976.

By E.K. Casaccio

The phone rarely rings more than twice before she answers. She doesn't know when she'll have time to talk. A manuscript needs finishing and should be mailed this week; friends are coming for dinner and she simply must get some yard work in before it gets too cold.

"Everybody seems to think since they've found a 91-year-old woman who's still active, they have to interview her," she says.

Age probably is the least of many reasons people want to talk with Mabel Lee.

"Mabel Lee" may be more recognizable to University of Nebraska—Lincoln students with the word "Hall" tagged on to it.

What was formerly the Women's Physical Education Building, on 14th and Vine streets, was named for her last May 7. She was so honored because of her role in furthering women's athletics nationally, and for her direction of the Department of

Physical Education for Women at UNL from 1924 through 1952.

So how does it feel to have a building named after her?

"I'm taken by surprise every now and then when my name turns up in the paper and I find it says something is going to happen at Mabel Lee Hall," she said.

"It's been a little strange to get used to. I guess that most of the buildings are named after people who are dead."

The building was renamed when the men's and women's departments merged.

"It was no longer a woman's building. . . and the men objected to its being called a woman's building. So it was the wish of the men and women (of the department) that my name be put on the building. I'm very proud of it."

In her years at the university she was called simply 'Miss Lee', and still is by nearly every acquaintance younger than 91.

"I never got on a first name basis, not even with my staff," Miss Lee said.

"When people began calling (people) by first names it was a great shock to me. And it's a great shock to me today to have people who never saw me before be introduced, and they'll say, 'Well, hi Mabel,' and here I'm old enough to be their great-grandmother. That still takes my breath away."

"It's a bit of a lack of respect but I don't take it that way because I know they don't intend it that way. We didn't call people by their first names the early part of this century."

"I sometimes wonder if it was I, or if I just imagined I lived then. . . it was so different."

"Families were not very keen about daughters preparing for a career," she said. "At that time parents weren't in the habit of thinking of their daughters getting ready to have a career. They expected them to get married or stay at home and live with the parents all their lives."

"My parents were different in that they were determined that I was to have a college degree. And my mother was determined that all four of her daughters were to go to college."

Mabel Lee was the second eldest daughter of Centerville, Ia., coal mine owner-operator David Alexander Lee and Nebraskan Jennie Aikman Lee.

"Mother had hoped to go the University of Nebraska, but the grasshoppers came and ruined all the crops," she said. The loss of crops left no money for college, but "she never got over her great desire that she might have gone to college."

'I looked around me. . . and couldn't see that marriage had much to offer.'

"So she determined that her daughters were to go to college. And the man she married wanted her to have whatever she wanted. So he fought to see that we got it too."

All four did go to college.

Mabel Lee was graduated magna cum laude from Coe College in Cedar Rapids with a degree in biology. She then spent two years at the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, later a part of Wellesley College.

She grew up in Centerville and although she wasn't a tomboy, "far from it," she loved sports.

"My father was a great lover of all sports and he had no son. He was just delighted that he had this one daughter who, even though she was a sickly child, was just crazy about sports when she was well," Miss Lee said.

"I did what they call jogging on my own as a young girl. I used to run round and round and none of the girls would ever run with me. I don't know why I wanted to do it. I just had the urge."

She credits this exercise, and drinking milk daily, for her good health. Doctors still marvel at her good heart, "so some good fairy was taking care of me and gave me that urge to run," she said.

As a sophomore in high school she heard about a new game called "basketball" from her friends in finishing school.

"I was just crazy about it and curious. . . We all sat down on a curb in front of the high school and read the rule book and tried to figure out what it meant. We had never seen a game played."

In spite of her ignorance of the game, she had her father set up the court and her mother make bloomers for the girls to wear under their skirts.

"It took the public a long time to accept girls in bloomers (playing) out of doors," Miss Lee said. She smiled.

In fact, she said, girls started basketball in the midwest.

"It was considered a sissy game. That slowed it down for the boys."

When she was graduated from the Boston Normal school in 1910, Mabel Lee was one of a few women with a teaching degree in physical education.

She returned to Coe College to take over as director of women's physical education because the previous director was to be married.

"And when a woman decided to get married she resigned her position," Miss Lee said. "It was unthinkable of her to marry and keep her position."



Photo courtesy Mabel Lee

1914—Mabel Lee at Coe College, her first teaching job.

Miss Lee said she never married, because of her career. "A woman could not swing marriage and a career if she did not have money in back of it." "I looked around me. . . and I couldn't see that marriage had much to offer," although, she said, her parents' marriage was good.

"I looked at the drab lives they (friends) were leading and decided it wasn't for me. I think they felt they had to take the first offer that came."

"I think I enjoyed my dating more than some of the girls did because I didn't have that (marriage) in the back of my mind."

"The great bulk of the people thought the reason I never married was because I never had a chance. I went ahead and did what I wanted to do."

Miss Lee said she was not active in the suffragist movement, but she and her friends were for it.

When she was a young teacher she had a sign pasted in her window which read: "Votes for Women". She had a date for a dance one weekend and when he saw it, he said, "Do you believe in that sign?"

Miss Lee said, "Yes, (or) I wouldn't put it up. Why?"

"Well if you do," he said, "our date is off."

Miss Lee said "good riddance." She was glad to know that side of him.

After teaching at Coe College for eight years she became director of physical education for women at Oregon Agricultural College in Corvallis and Beloit College in Wisconsin. These years are covered in her book, *Memories of a Bloomer Girl*. The sequel, *Memories Beyond Bloomers*, covers her years in Nebraska and will be published in 1978.

Miss Lee arrived at the University of Nebraska on the tail end of some student unrest. "The girls just almost had a riot," she said. "They demanded a hearing before the regents and said you've got to separate the men from the women."

"They demanded they bring in a woman from the outside world (to take charge). They had too much inbreeding."

Miss Lee said she was brought to Nebraska in 1924 as director to "clean house." The staff were graduates of the University of Nebraska and the courses, which basically consisted of gymnastics, were taught by two teachers, she said.

"It was a test to get them (men and women) separated and to weed out the undesirables who would come thinking they could put on a gym suit and romp around for four years and get a college degree."

Mabel Lee emphasized a good intramural program rather than intercollegiate athletics.

"In teaching, the thing that I was striving for was the most good for the greatest number," Miss Lee said. "A lot of my decisions were based on that. Intramural sports was opening the door to everybody whether they were good or highly-skilled or not."

She said because of this, she was a "great disappointment" to English professor Louise Pound who had coached, managed and played intercollegiate basketball at the university at the turn of the century.

"She thought I was going to revive the great games she put on in her day. She was not interested in those who did not excel, she had no time for them. She was a coach rather than a sportswoman."

"She'll turn over in her grave when she hears I've been inducted into the (Coe College) Sports Hall of Fame."

The hall of fame is the most recent of the honors and titles given to Mabel Lee. She holds honorary doctorates from Coe College, Beloit College and George Williams College in Chicago.

She was the first woman president of The American Alliance of Health, Physical Education and Recreation (AAHPER) in 1931, and of the American Academy of Physical Education in 1940.

And in recognition of International Women's Year in 1975, the AAHPER created the Mabel Lee Award. It is the only AAHPER award named after a woman and a living person.

After what one might hesitate to call her retirement in 1952, Mabel Lee spent a year as a physical education consultant to the Iraq Ministry of Education on a Fulbright scholarship.

In addition to the Bloomer books, she has written *A Brief History of Physical Education* in 1958 and the *Seventy-Five Year History of AAHPER* in 1960. She was archivist of the AAHPER from 1960 to 1970.

There are many more awards and activities credited to Mabel Lee. But, perhaps more important, Miss Lee said, is that when she began only three percent of the women on campus participated in intramural sports. When she retired 81 percent were participating.

Maybe Louise Pound wouldn't have minded after all.