

Lee, James Milton

(1912–2013)

KUK HEON LEE

Kuk Heon Lee graduated from Sahmyook University (B.A.), Newbold College (M.A.), and Sahmyook University (Ph.D.). From 1990 to 2009, he served as a pastor at Korean Union Conference. In 2010, he joined Sahmyook University as a lecturer and professor at the Theology Department. His research and teaching interests are in Church History. He wrote several books and published several papers on the subject. Currently, he is also the Dean of Planning at Sahmyook University.

James Lee (Korean name Je-Myeong Lee) was the first president of the Korean Junior College, the predecessor of Sahmyook University in Korea, and was an educational missionary who established the site of Sahmyook University and founded the higher education project.

Background

It was the influence of his parents that James Lee became a missionary in Korea. His parents were Howard M. Lee and Carrie Scott Lee, who were early missionaries in Korea. James was born in Soonan, South Pyongan Province, on September 21, 1912, when his father served as principal of the Korean Industrial School (Uimyeong School) in Soonan, Korea.¹ James Lee, who grew up in Soonan, spent his childhood in Korea as a missionary kid until 1920 when his father resigned as principal and temporarily returned to the United States. Three years later, in late 1923, his parents returned to Korea and served as principal of the Uimyeong School until 1936. During this period James received secondary education at Far Eastern Academy in Shanghai from 1928 to 1930.² After completing his secondary education, James moved to the United States in 1930 to study at Southern California Junior College (presently La Sierra University). Then he studied theology at Pacific Union College in 1934, graduating in May 1937.³ After graduation James Lee, who married Marguerite Siglinger in Glendale, California, decided to serve as a missionary in Korea, where he grew up as a child, after receiving a proposal from the GC for Korean missionary work. After training as a publishing expert at Pacific Press in Mountain View near San Francisco for about a year, he entered Korea in October 1938.⁴



James Lee established the site of Sahmyook University.

Photo courtesy of Kuk Heon Lee.

Ministry in Korea

He was appointed manager of the Korean Public House (KPH). However, Elder Gillis, who was working as the secretary at the time, extended his retirement by one year, during which time James Lee was in charge of Soonan Middle School's Department of Business.⁵ He then returned to Seoul in October 1939, where he taught briefly at the Chosen Union Workers Training Institute. And when Elder Gills retired in February 1940, he officially became a manager of the KPH.⁶

But his ministry as manager of KPH did not last long. Japan, which had colonized Korea, withdrew all American missionaries after planning a Pacific War with the United States in 1940. As a result, all foreign missionaries in Korea began to withdraw from Korea. James Lee was transferred to the Philippines and left Korea on November 23, 1940, and arrived in Manila on November 30, 1940.⁷ A month after his arrival in Manila, he arrived in Iloilo, central Philippines, and began serving as the principal of the West Bisayan Academy.⁸

However, in December 1941, Japan raided Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and conquered the Philippines. The following year, in April 1942, Japan occupied Iloilo, where Bisayan Academy was located. James Lee was then taken into custody for possession of a radio and jailed for three months at Iloilo Municipal Prison. On July 25, 1942, James was transferred to Iloilo, and on June 16, 1943, he was transferred back to Santo Thomas. Like this, he spent three years in prison. It was on February 23, 1945, that this life of hardship ended. At that time the Philippines was liberated by the American army led by General Douglas MacArthur, and James Lee was released from prison. He then reached San Pedro, California, via Honolulu on the USS Edrimal Everly, ending his captivity.⁹

After being released from detention in the Philippines and returning to the United States, James Lee was offered a job as a Bible teacher at Walla Walla College in Washington State. So he served as a Bible teacher at Walla Walla College from the fall of 1945 to the following year. Here he taught the Bible and studied medicine for medical missionary work. However, due to his call to become a missionary for educational projects in Korea, he could not continue his medical studies and gave up his dream of medical missionary work.¹⁰ Instead, he left the United States with George Rye and Leland Mitchell in April 1947 and arrived in Incheon to resume his educational service in Korea.¹¹

After arriving in Korea, James Lee, who was appointed as a teacher at the Korean Union Workers Training Institute, taught six theology subjects at the institute that reopened on September 1, 1947.¹² However, the training institute was closed again a year later due to a lack of facilities and educational environment. In order to overcome this poor environment and develop worker's training in earnest, James Lee and Yeo-Sik Lee began searching for a site to build a college in November 1947. Eventually he found a site suitable for Adventist education near Taeneung. After the Chosen Union Mission decided to establish a college on the site on November 26, 1947, it paid \$7,000 in July 1948 to purchase about one hundred seventy-five acres (220,000 square meters) of land.¹³ In this way, the site of Korean Junior College has been prepared.

Meanwhile James Lee was appointed as the principal of Sahmyook Academy, which was established in September 1947 in Myeonmok-dong, Seoul. James Lee, a seminary teacher and principal of Sahmyook Middle School, bought a school site in Taereung and began building facilities such as classrooms, dormitories, houses, and offices with K. L. Mitchell (Korean name Je-Il Min). The cost of the buildings totaled \$85,000, including \$35,000 in aid to the GC.¹⁴ During the construction of the campus in Taereung, the training institute, which had been closed, was reopened at Hoegi-dong Headquarters Church on October 18, 1949. At this time James Lee was appointed as the principal of the training institute. Shortly after the opening of the institute, the campus was completed in Taeneung, and James Lee, the principal of the institute and Sahmyook Middle School, moved the two schools to the new campus in Taereung to carry out educational projects.¹⁵

After settling in Taereung in May 1950, the training institute and Sahmyook Middle School merged to become Korean Junior College, and James Lee was appointed as the first dean of the college.¹⁶ However, a month later on June 25, the Korean War broke out, and the school was closed again. When the war broke out, most missionaries withdrew to Japan, including James Lee. The junior college was temporarily operated in Seongsanpo, Jeju Island, on March 11, 1951. When the war was lulled, James Lee returned to Korea to teach students in the refuge. In November 1951 he returned to Taeneung and reopened the institute. The institute was renamed the Korean Union Training School (Sam Yuk Shn Hak Won).¹⁷

James Lee served as a president and business manager at the training school until returning to the United States on furlough in May 1953. The most special thing he did during these periods was to build a reservoir in the mountain valley behind the college site. In the spring of 1953 he rented four bulldozers from the U.S. Army to build a reservoir and set up a 20-foot drainage pipe to irrigate the farm.¹⁸ The reservoir has become a beautiful lake and still provides a resting place for many people. Sahmyook University named the lake Jemyeongho after James Lee's Korean name.

In the spring of 1953, the executive committee of the KUM decided on James Lee's vacation. His successor, Clinton Lee, briefly served as the president of the training school, and on February 15, 1954, Dong-Sim Chung took over the education work. On August 25 of that year, Donald S. Lee (Korean name Dan-Yeol Lee), who was a younger brother of James Lee, joined as a missionary and succeeded his older brother as the president of the training school.¹⁹ In this way the whole family (Howard Lee, James Lee, and Donald Lee) has served as educational missionaries in Korea.

After returning to the United States on vacation, James Lee entered the SDA Theological Seminary in September 1953 and graduated from the seminary in August 1954.²⁰ Returning to Korea after the graduation, he was appointed as the Education and Mineral Secretary of the KUM and also worked as the director of the Voice of Prophecy, Korea (VOP Korea). While serving as the administrator of the KUM, he translated "Step to Christ," "The Desire of Ages," and "The Great Controversy." He also played an important role in cultural missionary work, such as preparing radio broadcasts.²¹ His last service in Korea continued until late 1957 when he was appointed

president of Mountain View College in the Philippines.

Later Life

In October 1957 he returned to the United States after ending his missionary work in Korea and was offered a job as an educational missionary in the Philippines. He moved to Mountain View College in the Philippines in late 1957. Here he contributed to the development of the college for three years until 1960. In particular, he tried to change the college from a two-year course to a four-year course. As a result, a four-year course was established at the college in 1960. James Lee then returned to the United States, where he received a doctorate in pedagogy (Ed.D.) at Andrews University. He began his Ph.D. in 1962 at the University of Southern California and completed his Ph.D. thesis in 1966 entitled "Ellen White's Influence on Education."²²

James Lee, who was born in Korea and devoted his entire life as a missionary, visited Korea from time to time after returning to the United States permanently and encouraged the development of Sahmyook University. In 2006, marking the 100th anniversary of Sahmyook University's foundation, he published his autobiography "Our Country, Our College" and dedicated it to Sahmyook University. James Lee, who loved Korea until the end, passed away in the arms of the Lord at the age of 101 on February 19, 2013. Sahmyook University erected a monument under the hill of prayer (Oyatbong) on June 1, 2013 to honor his dedicated missionary work.²³

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NOTES

1. James M. Lee, *Our Country, Our College* (Seoul: Sahmyook University Press, 2006), 30.

2. Ibid., 56
3. Ibid., 57-68.
4. *Church Compass*, March 1940, 48.
5. James M. Lee, *Our Country, Our College*, 99.
6. *Church Compass*, March 1940, 48.
7. *Church Compass*, February 1941, 16.
8. James M. Lee, *James Lee Internee*, Seoul: Light & Voice Press, 2011, 32.
9. Lee, *Our Country, Our College*, 113.
10. Ibid., 116-120.
11. *Church Compass*, May-June 1947, 16.
12. Kuk Heon Lee, *History of One Hundred Years of Sahmyook University* (Seoul: Sahmyook University Press, 2008), 208.
13. Ibid., 215.
14. Ibid., 216.
15. *Church Compass*, December 1949, 64.
16. *Church Compass*, July 1951, 41.
17. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1953), 123, 252.
18. Lee, *Our Country, Our College*, 215, 216.
19. *Church Compass*, October 1954, 56.
20. Lee, *Our Country, Our College*, 217-220.
21. Ibid., 222, 223.
22. Ibid., 241-245.

23. *Sahmyook News*, June 10, 2013 (Sahmyook University Archive, Nowon-gu, Seoul, Korea).

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