



John and Melva Lee

Photos courtesy of Deslie Ellis.

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## Lee, John Raymond (1930–2017) and Melva Joyce (Ford) (1929–2008)

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### BARRY OLIVER

Barry Oliver, Ph.D., retired in 2015 as president of the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Sydney, Australia. An Australian by birth Oliver has served the Church as a pastor, evangelist, college teacher, and administrator. In retirement, he is a conjoint associate professor at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored over 106 significant publications and 192 magazine articles. He is married to Julie with three adult sons and three grandchildren.

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John and Melva Lee served 34 of their 39 years of denominational employment in the South Pacific mission fields of Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and the Solomon Islands. Melva Lee trained as a nurse and used her

knowledge and skills to treat disease and teach the principles of healthy living. John Lee trained as a teacher. After a period of school and system-wide leadership in education he was ordained, assuming leadership responsibility at local church, mission and union levels of the church structure.

## Early Life

John Raymond Lee was born on December 7, 1930, in Echuca, Victoria, Australia.<sup>1</sup> The fifth child born to Frank and Grace (Measures) Lee,<sup>2</sup> his siblings were Margaret (Heaton), Joan (Murdoch), Norma (Lamb), Gordon, Robert, and Ralph.<sup>3</sup> Lee and his siblings started school at Redesdale, located west of Kyneton, in a one-teacher school with 22 students ranging from grades one to eight.<sup>4</sup> The family moved to Kyneton, then Numurkah where Frank Lee managed the general store.<sup>5</sup>

While in Numurkah, the family attended the Methodist church for two years during which time they received the *Signs of the Times* from a Seventh-day Adventist family in the community. Lee and his brother, Gordon, enjoyed reading the articles in the *Signs*.<sup>6</sup> After Bible studies with Pastor Gerald Peacock, John and Gordon Lee were baptized in the Goulburn River at Shepparton in 1941 and became members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. John Lee was just eleven years old at the time.<sup>7</sup> Sometime later, after studies with Pastor A. J. Gathercole, their mother was baptized.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, a church was established in Numurkah.<sup>9</sup> Their father, who served in the army during World War II, was also baptized when he returned home.<sup>10</sup> Pastor Peacock made a lasting impression on Lee who determined to become a missionary in the South Pacific, following in the footsteps of his mentor.<sup>11</sup> His brother, Gordon, also became a minister and was later appointed president of the Bismarck Solomon's Union Mission.

## Early Work and Marriage

John completed his secondary schooling at Castlemaine, Victoria, in 1946.<sup>12</sup> In 1947, he worked as junior teacher in the Preston Seventh-day Adventist School in Melbourne, Victoria.<sup>13</sup> In 1948, he attended the Australasian Missionary College at Avondale to pursue studies in education. He graduated from the Theological Normal course in 1950.<sup>14</sup> After graduation, John was appointed as a teacher in a new school opening in Kingaroy, Queensland.<sup>15</sup> He taught with principal, Fred Brown.

While at Avondale, John met Melva Joyce Ford from Kingaroy. Melva Ford was born at St. Aubans Hospital in Kingaroy on August 18, 1929,<sup>16</sup> to Herbert Henry Ford and Clarice Elsie Tinworth.<sup>17</sup> She was the third child of five children—Phyllis (Raethel), Ronald, Melva, Norman, and Frank.<sup>18</sup> In 1930, the Ford family moved to a dairy farm at Mannuem, where they also raised corn, peanuts, and other crops. Mannuem was near the Bunya Mountains, southwest of Kingaroy. Melva Ford attended the Mannuem Creek School.<sup>19</sup>

In 1947, Melva Ford commenced studies at Avondale College in the pre-nursing course. In 1948, she was accepted into the general nursing course at Kurri Kurri Hospital where she completed two and a half years of her training and then transferred to Kingaroy Hospital.<sup>20</sup> John Lee and Melva Ford were engaged in November 1950 at the time of Lee's graduation. Ford's transfer to Kingaroy Hospital coincided with Lee's appointment to the Kingaroy Adventist Primary School.

John Lee and Melva Ford were married in the Kingaroy Church on the December 19, 1951.<sup>21</sup> Around the time of their wedding Lee was called to be principal of the Vailala Training School at Belepa, in the Coral Sea Union Mission in Papua New Guinea. After a brief honeymoon, they travelled to Sydney for medical checks and preparation for overseas service. On March 3, 1952, they flew from Rose Bay, Sydney, on a Transoceanic Airways Solent Flying Boat under the captaincy of P. G. Taylor.<sup>22</sup> Arriving in Port Moresby, they travelled on the mission boat, *M. V. Diari* up the Vailala River from the Gulf of Papua to the Vailala Training School and their home at Belepa.

John and Melva Lee worked tirelessly together to ensure that the students and staff were kept well and healthy. The constant rain and the tropical conditions were not conducive to good health. Gardens, growing melons, pumpkins, and greens, along with other staples, provided nutritious food for the students and staff. As a nurse, Melva Lee cared for the dispensary treating up to 3,000 patients a month.<sup>23</sup> She was highly respected by the Health Department Administration who advised that all medications and equipment that Mrs. Lee required were to be provided. They also requested that she assist in an extensive anti-yaws vaccination program. Melva Lee and her team of helpers vaccinated over 10,000 village people in the Vailala District.<sup>24</sup> John Lee also assisted with medical needs, particularly in dentistry as he had taken a short course at the dental hospital in Sydney before their appointment. He also assisted with births when they were too difficult for Melva Lee to handle on her own or when she was away.<sup>25</sup>

All three of the Lees' children were born during their years in Belepa. Melva Lee returned to Kingaroy for Deslie's birth.<sup>26</sup> Russell was born in Port Moresby, and Lorraine, was also born in Port Moresby.<sup>27</sup>

At the end of 1957, the family transferred to Kabiufa School near Goroka in the Highlands of New Guinea.<sup>28</sup> John served as the principal of the missionary college. There he commenced a horticulture program to train the students and community to grow food to provide for the college and to sell the surplus to raise funds to assist with college expenses and improvements. Baskets were made out of local bush materials and the produce was transported by plane all over the country to be sold.<sup>29</sup> Male staff members were often called upon to calm village disputes and fighting between local clans, and they often walked between groups in order to halt tribal fighting. Melva Lee assisted in the medical clinic and worked with the Country Women's Association.<sup>30</sup> She also involved herself with the welfare of the students, making sure that they were clothed and well fed. John Lee was ordained at Kabiufa on July 14, 1962.<sup>31</sup> The family remained at Kabiufa until November 1964.<sup>32</sup>

## Union Education and Youth Leadership

The Lee family moved to Lae at the beginning of 1965 where John Lee took up the position of Education and Youth (Missionary Volunteer) Secretary for the Coral Sea Union Mission.<sup>33</sup> During his time at the Coral Sea Union, Lee travelled extensively, sometimes walking over isolated mountain tracks to visit villages, churches, and schools. At a time when written birth records were non-existent, he had a unique way of determining a child's readiness for school. Lee would line the local children up and have them reach one arm over the top of their heads and ask them to try and touch their ears. Those who could touch their ears were deemed ready for school.<sup>34</sup>

His arduous trekking over mountain trails awakened in Lee a strong desire to advance the aviation program of the Church. When the new mission aircraft, the *Malcolm Abbott* (Sierra Delta Bravo), arrived in the country, John Lee was the one who wrote the story reported in the *Australasian Record*.<sup>35</sup> The plane was delivered by pilots Wayne and Darrell Fowler.<sup>36</sup> Their meeting on this occasion started a long friendship between John Lee and Wayne Fowler.

In January 1967, the family was relocated to Rabaul on the island of New Britain where Lee became Education and Youth Secretary of the Bismarck-Solomons Union Mission.<sup>37</sup> Again, he travelled around the union for long periods leaving his wife to care for the family and the many visitors who came to the mission station. The family enjoyed living on the beautiful harbor where they snorkeled over the reefs.<sup>38</sup>

Lee continued to demonstrate a strong commitment to the aviation program of the Church. On the occasion of a visit from Wayne Fowler of Shaw Island, Canada, who in the last months of 1968 flew his twin-engine plane to Rabaul to assist with transportation and missionary outreach, Lee wrote:

This field is ripe for advance and greater things in soul-winning. Rapid and regular contact with every centre of our work, particularly in the less accessible areas, is the key to great soul winning. We are in an age when the message is to 'fly in the midst of heaven.'<sup>39</sup>

## Ministry in Australia

In December 1970, John and Melva Lee moved their family back to Australia<sup>40</sup> in order for their children to attend secondary school and college.<sup>41</sup> Lee was invited to be the pastor of Wallsend church in Newcastle, New South Wales.<sup>42</sup> Then, in 1972 he was transferred to Avondale College as Dean of Men.<sup>43</sup> While there, Melva Lee was engaged as a factory guide at the Sanitarium Health Food factory in Cooranbong.<sup>44</sup> John Lee continued his involvement with Adventist Aviation serving as secretary.<sup>45</sup> In early 1975, he organized a "fly-in" for all who were involved or interested in the Adventist Aviation Association.<sup>46</sup> In March 1975, John and Melva Lee moved to the South Queensland Conference where he was pastor of South Brisbane church.<sup>47</sup> While there Lee flew aircraft for

the South Queensland chapter of the Adventist Aviation Association, carrying members to isolated townships in Queensland, and sharing hope and faith with the inhabitants.<sup>48</sup>

## Back to the Pacific

In January 1976, Lee accepted an invitation to be president of the Tonga Mission.<sup>49</sup> While in Tonga he continued to pursue agriculture and oversaw the establishment of market gardens and the development of peanut farming.<sup>50</sup> An opportunity to minister to the King of Tonga came shortly after Lee arrived:

On May 13, the mother of the Adventist Noble, Ma'afu, whose name was Anau, died, and I was asked to conduct the funeral on May 14, which was a Friday. Anau was also the aunt of His Majesty the King, and consequently, the funeral was a big affair involving the royal family. His Majesty gave permission for our church to conduct the funeral in that Anau was a member of our Nuku'alofa church. All the royal family were in attendance, and this gave us an opportunity to share our belief in the second coming of our Lord and Saviour, and also to present a little on our belief in the state of the dead. On this occasion also, the Beulah Band led the very long procession that went from the home of Noble Ma'afu to the cemetery. A message was passed back to us from the royal household expressing appreciation for the service that was held.<sup>51</sup>

John Lee's friendship with Wayne Fowler led to the establishment of an aviation company in Tonga that assisted the mission.<sup>52</sup> Fowler contributed a great deal to Adventist aviation in the South Pacific.<sup>53</sup>

After almost eleven years in Tonga, John Lee became president of the Western Pacific Union Mission located in Honiara, Solomon Islands.<sup>54</sup> Many of the first missionaries to Papua New Guinea, who had worked with John and Melva Lee in that country, were from the Solomon Islands. They included the Vave, Songavare, and Paul families.

<sup>55</sup> Lee worked hard to ensure that the mission was self-sustaining through agriculture, farming, and other industries.<sup>56</sup>

## Summary of Service <sup>57</sup>

April 1, 1947 – December 31, 1947	Junior Teacher	Preston, Victoria
January 1, 1951 – December 31, 1951	Teacher	Kingaroy, Queensland
January 1, 1952 – December 31, 1957	Principal	Belepa, Papua
January 1, 1958 – November 24, 1964	Principal	Kabiufa, New Guinea
November 25, 1964 – December 31, 1966	Union MV and Education Secretary	Coral Sea Union, Lae, New Guinea

January 1, 1967 – December 31, 1970	Union MV and Education Secretary	Bismarck-Solomons Union, Rabaul, New Guinea
January 1, 1971 – April 22, 1972	Pastor/Evangelist	Wallsend, North NSW Conference
April 23, 1972 – March 17, 1975	Dean of men	Avondale College
March 18, 1975 – January 17, 1976	Pastor/Pilot	South Brisbane, South Queensland Conference
January 18, 1976 – October 30, 1985	President	Tonga Mission
October 31, 1985 – November 30, 1990	President	Western Pacific Union, Honiara, Solomon Islands

## Retirement

After 34 years of mission service and five years of ministry in Australia, John and Melva Lee retired in December 1990 at Redland Bay, Queensland, near Bert and Clarice Ford.<sup>58</sup> Lee pastored two churches in retirement while they lived at Victoria Point, Redland Bay.<sup>59</sup> After the passing of Clarice Ford in 1991<sup>60</sup> and Bert Ford in 1994,<sup>61</sup> the Lees moved to Cooranbong in October 2003, so they could be closer to their children and their families.<sup>62</sup> Melva Lee passed away on November 18, 2008.<sup>63</sup> She was buried in the Avondale Adventist Cemetery.<sup>64</sup>

## Later Years

In 2010, Lee became reacquainted with Laurel (Hawkes) Thoresen and began to develop a friendship. Thoresen lived in Portland, Oregon, the United States. Her practice was to visit family in Australia every American winter. John Lee and Laurel Thoresen were married in December 2010 at the home of Lorraine and Dwayne Prescott, Lee's daughter and son-in-law.

John and Laurel Lee lived in the Avondale Retirement Village for the next seven years and enjoyed many travelling experiences together both by sea and air, visiting family in America and Australia. Lee continued to garden and be actively involved in the local church, Adventist Aviation Association, and other projects dear to his heart. John Raymond Lee died on November 8, 2017. He was buried in the Avondale Adventist Cemetery.<sup>65</sup>

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