Before George W. Lee moved from the city of Buffalo, New York, to Okanogan County, in rural north-central Washington, something must have stimulated an interest in growing apples. He was still a student living at home with his parents in 1880¹, then enrolled in the Literary Department at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor from 1881–83. By 1891 he had become a manufacturer in Hazelhurst, Oneida County, Wisconsin.² He had been a member of Alpha Delta Phi Fraternity, Peninsula Chapter, along with his kin, H. E. Montgomery (H. E.'s mother was Helen Lee Montgomery,³ a sister of Franklin Lee, so he and George were first cousins). The Fraternity catalogue of 1899 listed George Waith Lee at 327 W. 125th Street, New York, N.Y., as a "Real estate dealer since 1894. With Lee, Holland & Co., lumber dealers, Buffalo, N.Y., 1883-89; Yawkey & Lee Lumber Co., Buffalo, 1889-94."⁴ The University's General Catalogue of 1902 listed George Waith Lee in real estate, residing at 2107 7th Avenue, New York, N.Y., and Henry E. Montgomery was in the lumber business in Buffalo, N.Y.⁵ Mr. Lee also reportedly was educated at the Michigan Military Academy.⁶

Letterhead on stationery used by George Waith Lee for his Last Will and Testament.
Sometime between 1902 and 1905, George W. Lee must have decided on a career change, as he went "out West" and, in June 1906, bought 40 acres of land in Okanogan County, Washington, for the sum of $2,200 from Glenn O. and Jennie E. Young, with water rights from the Okanogan Water User's Association. This association had been formed to utilize water from the proposed Okanogan Irrigation Project, which was established after Congress passed the Reclamation Act in 1902. Because his father died in July 1906, however, George W. Lee returned to Buffalo to settle the estate, so he did not move to Okanogan County until September 1909. He brought two assistants with him, Tracey Williams and Duff Waldow, who were to make improvements on his land while he spent the winter in Florida. Tracy R. Williams, also from New York, and two others were listed as hired men in Mr. Lee’s household on the 1910 census. The local newspaper reported George W. Lee was "making extensive improvements on his land" and was "putting in a model orchard" at that time.

In August 1911, the same newspaper mentioned George's sister, Mrs. Ferdon, together with her daughter, had spent the summer with him at his Three Buttes ranch, and they had traveled to Lake Chelan in his automobile.

At the time of the 1910 census, E. L. Ferdon, age 50, widow, born in New York, and daughter A., age 25, born in New York, parents born in New York, were in St. Paul, Minnesota. The 1905 Minnesota state census, however, listed Etta L. Ferdon, age 52, born in New York, living in St. Paul with Adel, age 22, born in Florida, parents reportedly born in New Hampshire and Georgia. Things began to make sense after viewing the 1900 census, which showed Etta L. Ferdon, born Feb 1853, widow, born in New York, living in Ithaca, New York, with her two sons, Franklyn L. and Edwin N. Ferdon, both born in Michigan, and adopted daughter, Adele F., born in June 1882 in Florida, whose parents were born in Massachusetts and Georgia.
So, it turns out, George married his sister's adopted daughter, about twenty years his junior, sometime between the summer of 1911 and spring of 1914. (No marriage record was found in Okanogan or King Counties, or on the Washington Digital Archives website, or in Ramsey County, Minnesota.) The Okanogan Independent first mentioned George W. Lee with a wife when they sponsored a "Victor concert" at their Three Buttes Ranch home on 18 April 1914, to benefit St. Margaret's Guild of the Episcopal Church. It featured recorded classical music by Liszt, Wagner, Schubert, Beethoven, Dvorak, and others. The concert was such a success, they repeated it the following month.

George W. Lee, along with about forty other automobile enthusiasts, formed the Motor Car Association of Okanogan County in June 1914. He was named vice president for 1914-15. He owned a Stearns-Knight car at that time. Mr. Lee also contributed the use of his car for an excursion of orchardists to Penticton and Summerland, British Columbia, who wanted to learn how the Canadians controlled blight in their orchards.

The biggest events of the year in Okanogan County, however, were the elections to choose which town would be the county seat. George W. Lee, described as "a well-to-do Pogue Flat orchardist" and the only person from the Omak area with a privately owned automobile, traveled around the county in his Stanley Steamer with Don Jaquish campaigning for Omak. Mr. Lee reportedly had one wooden leg. Okanogan city, however, won the elimination contest held in September by a vote of 2,213 to 1,304. Next came the runoff between Conconully, which had been the county seat since 1886, and Okanogan city. Again Okanogan city won, this time...
3,152 to 1,602. The new county courthouse, still in use today, was constructed in 1915, its Mexican-influenced architecture attributed to Okanogan mayor William C. Brown's fascination with the Southwest.²⁰

George W. Lee was active in promoting high standards and agriculturally sound practices for producing fruits in the Okanogan valley. He was a member of the Wenatchee–North Central Washington Growers' League,²¹ and also spoke out when some county residents wanted to stop funding for the office of county agriculturalist: “To me it would seem a distinct step backward even to think of abandoning the office. The small cost of the service pays big dividends. We would be ‘saving at the spigot and wasting at the bung hole’ to abolish an office with such potentialities for good.”²²

Photos of Okanogan County Courthouse, September 2008, courtesy Evelyn Roehl.

Of course, having an automobile required decent roads. Mr. Brown, who was also a judge and chairman of the good roads committee of the Okanogan Commercial Club, organized a convention, held 23 March 1915, at which Geo. W. Lee was named chairman of the meeting. The Washington State Legislature had just appropriated money for road construction, so the meeting attendees, who came from all over the county, discussed how to best spend those dollars and whether to form a permanent organization, which they did, naming it "Okanogan County Better Roads' Association."²³

George W. Lee may have been one of the people seated in the cars in this photograph by Paul Standar, published in the Okanogan Independent on 5 June 1914, courtesy of Wenatchee Daily World.

After the United States entered the fray of World War I, the federal government urged people to buy Liberty Loans. Geo. W. Lee generously subscribed $1,000 for the effort while others in Okanogan County collectively subscribed $10,000.²⁴ A Home Defense Council was also organized, which included Geo. W. Lee and Mrs. Geo. W. Lee of Omak as committee members, and George took on the duty of "Coordination of Farm Labor."²⁵
In May 1918, George W. Lee decided to buy a house on Fourth Avenue in Okanogan from Ralph Hunner and remodel it to live in by the fall. A report of deeds filed at the Okanogan County Courthouse showed Ralph Hunner sold his property to G. W. Lee for the whopping sum of $10. The carpenters who George W. Lee hired for the remodel were W. L. Boardman and R. L. Cole, who installed "bath equipments."

In November 1918, the local newspaper reported the sad news that "Miss Anna Lee, youngest sister of Mrs. E. L. Ferdon and George W. Lee of Three Butts [sic] ranch, died of pneumonia on November 2nd at Buffalo, N.Y." She had been a member of the Buffalo Historical Society, which also published a notice of her death, saying, "She was long devoted to welfare work in this city."

During 1919, George W. Lee was involved with the Local Improvement District for his township (Pogue Flat), was elected vice president of C. E. Blackwell & Co. department store at its annual stockholders meeting, paid membership dues of $6 to the Okanogan Commercial Club, and became a subscriber to the Okanogan Victory Loan, another federal government program to help pay for the War Department's involvement in World War I.

Mr. & Mrs. Lee (photo courtesy of Okanogan County Historical Society)

He and Mrs. Lee "moved to their Three Buttes Ranch after having spent the winter in town" in April, then moved back to town in November for the following winter.

Christmas Seal Crusader (Okanogan Independent, 4 December 1921, page 1)

The next year, however, Mrs. George W. (Adele) Lee made the news more often than her husband. She was elected president of the Anti-Tuberculosis League and, in this capacity, chaired local meetings, traveled to Tacoma and
Spokane for statewide Washington Tuberculosis Association meetings, and worked with a county nurse to educate the public about prevention of the deadly disease. As county chairman, she coordinated the sale of Tuberculosis Christmas Seals, appointing local chairmen (women) in all of the communities in Okanogan County. She also traveled to Penticton, B.C., with others from Okanogan to be present at a reception given to the Prince of Wales, visited Seattle in the spring, and attended a golden wedding celebration for Mr. and Mrs. H. J. Olive in Cashmere, Washington. She supported the Okanogan city library by donating books while her husband contributed $5. George W. Lee was also mentioned in the local gossip column when he "purchased a new Fordson tractor and a 3500 pound trailer, from the local dealer, B. E. Gregory."


Road sign at intersection of the Northeast corner of property once owned by G. W. Lee (“George” was also the surname of local residents.)

Orchard sign for the current owners of Three Buttes ranch. (Photos courtesy Evelyn Roehl taken in September 2008.)

George W. Lee gained the admiration of fellow attendees at a meeting of Reclamation Project water users and the reclamation director, Dr. Elwood Mead. Voicing the frustration felt by the water users, he put Dr. Mead on the spot to explain some of the government's actions or lack thereof. "George W. Lee was the first volunteer and he gave a talk that every water user should have heard."

The Lees found time for a few road trips in spring 1922, when George and Etta's sister, Daisy Lee Smith, came out from Buffalo. They visited Chelan for several days, then a few weeks later they drove through the Methow Valley. Mrs. Lee also sponsored a bridge tournament at their home at Three Buttes Ranch.
When electricity was installed in their house by Sam Albright later that summer, they went camping for two weeks with Mrs. Ferdon at Lake Chelan. Two years later, the Lees went camping in the Methow again, this time with Rev. and Mrs. Cyril Boddington.

In January 1926, a group photo with George W. Lee, other stockholders, and most of the employees of Blackwell Department Store, appeared in the *Okanogan Independent* on the occasion of the company's twenty-fifth anniversary. He died the following August.

George W. Lee's death was reported in three newspapers: *Okanogan Independent*, *Omak Chronicle*, and *Wenatchee Daily World*. The *Okanogan Independent* published not only an obituary but an editorial:

**GEORGE W. LEE**

In the death of George W. Lee this county loses one of its foremost citizens. Since the inception of the orchard development on the government project, Mr. Lee has been a leader in thought and action. His keen business judgment, foresight, analytical mind and financial resources have been available at all times to help in solving the problems of the district.

His activities have been carried on in the face of discouraging physical disabilities, which, though continuing to the end of his useful life, never made their mark in a disposition that was naturally cheerful. Life to Mr. Lee was a congenial and happy existence.

For many reasons he will be sorely missed in the community.
Although the Omak paper claimed he died of Rheumatism, the death certificate showed the primary cause of death was "Senile dementia" with contributory "Neuritis," duration of eight years. The Wenatchee paper mentioned Miss Alma Hendrickson of Spokane was called to provide nursing services several days before he died.

The Okanogan paper also mentioned that, on account of Mr. Lee's death, the local Paramount theatre was closed the previous day until after the funeral. The body was shipped to Silver Creek, New York, for burial near his relatives in Glenwood Cemetery.

In the Last Will and Testament of George Waith Lee, dated 25 August 1924 (almost two years to the day before his death), he bequeathed his entire estate to his wife, Adele F. F. Lee, and also appointed her executrix of his estate. An inventory and appraisement of his property by C. E. Blackwell and E. E. Copple in December 1926 estimated the value of all of his real estate and personal property at $98,829.78. Creditors' claims on the Final Account and Petition for Distribution, however, dated 19 December 1928, totaled more than $80,000—all due George W. Lee's sisters: Etta L. Ferdon, Nora L. Brown, and Daisy L. Smith, and the Estate of Anna O. Lee. (They had essentially loaned him money, probably their shares of inheritance from their father's estate, for which George W. Lee was executor, for investment purposes.) Other than a widow's allowance of $3,600 and reimbursement for other expenses, Adele F. F. Lee was not shown to have received anything else from the estate of her husband at that time. (Whether she was a beneficiary on a life insurance policy is unknown.)

George W. Lee's property in the Northeast quarter of the Southeast quarter, Section 22, Township 34 North Range 26, E. W. M., was not sold until 5 April 1939. An "Executors' Special Warranty Deed" listed the grantors as Seattle-First National Bank, administrator with the Will annexed of the Estate of Anna O. Lee, deceased, A. J. O'Connor, executor of the Estate of Etta Lee Ferdon, deceased, and Franklin Lee Ferdon, Edwin Nelson Ferdon and Adele F. F. Lee, devisees under the Will of Etta Lee Ferdon, deceased. They sold the 40 acres to P. D. George for $2,500 —only $300 more than George W. Lee had paid for it in 1906.
Mrs. George W. Lee continued to serve as president of the Anti-Tuberculosis League of Okanogan County until the summer of 1927. (In no edition of the *Okanogan Independent* was she referred to by her first name.) She and her adoptive mother/mother-in-law, Etta Lee Ferdon, then moved to Seattle, where both eventually died.

The Last Will and Testament of Etta Lee Ferdon, dated 13 October 1934, and filed in King County, Washington, after her death in 1937, bequeathed equal division of her property (one-third each) to her two sons, Franklin Lee Ferdon and Edwin Nelson Ferdon, and to Adele F. F. Lee, who was not identified as a relative. The Will also apologetically mentioned Etta's grandchildren, Caroline Patricia, Margit Cecile, Edwin Nelson Jr., and John Richard Ferdon: "I express regret that because of the heavy losses and depreciation which my assets have suffered . . . I find it necessary to eliminate various bequests which I made in my former Will. . . ." The Last Will also mentioned amounts paid by the Estate of Anna O. Lee with respect to the Okanogan County property, in which Etta had a three-fifths interest. A freight bill, among other invoices in the estate file, showed Joseph L. Arnet & Son in Ann Arbor, Michigan, billed for a grave marker, and Staffan Funeral Homes in Ann Arbor charged for cemetery services (Etta's body was buried beside her husband). Lyon Van & Storage Co. shipped goods from the Wilsonian Apartments (in the University District—another classic vintage apartment building) to Edwin N. Ferdon in Coshocton, Ohio, and Mrs. George C. Andrews in New York City. (Mrs. Andrews, née Marianne Lee Smith, was Etta's niece.) Although Etta, age 84, was the oldest child of Franklin Lee and Marianne Waith, she outlived all the other children. The *Okanogan Independent* said she was survived by two sons, Franklin in Seattle and "Ned, who lives in the east, and Mrs. George W. Lee, a foster daughter now living in Seattle."

Adele Felt Ferdon Lee passed away in Seattle on March 2, 1962. Her obituary said she was the widow of George Waith Lee and that she had formerly lived in Buffalo, New York, and Omak, Washington. The *Seattle Daily Times* said she was survived by two nieces, one in California and one in Florida, while the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* listed her as "Aunt of Anne Adele Jones, Savannah, Georgia," and said her remains were buried in Deland, Florida—her reported birthplace and, as previously mentioned, where George’s parents, Franklin and Marianne Lee, had vacationed. Mrs. Lee's probate file showed that her Will was written on 27 August 1949, and a codicil was signed on 30 September 1953, to revoke a bequest to Mr. & Mrs. Henry Ernest Montgomery in Silver Creek, New York. (H. E. Montgomery was the cousin with whom George W.
Lee had attended the University of Michigan.) She also nominated and appointed Theron Hawkes, an attorney in Seattle, as Executor. Bequests in the Will, not revoked, were to Mrs. John W. Ferdon in Grand Rapids, Michigan (Etta's granddaughter-in-law, also known as Mary L. A. Ferdon, who died in 1959 before Adele, but whose estate had not been settled before Adele died); friend Gertrude Andrus, Seattle; Anne Adele Jones in Savannah, Georgia, described as a half-sister; Gwinnett Hopkins Jones Mitchell in Colma, California, a half-niece, who was also listed in a filed letter as Mrs. John D. Mitchell in Lodi, California; Helen Isabelle Melvin in St. Petersburg, Florida, a half-niece; Marianne Lee Andrews in New Brunswick, New Jersey, a great-niece; and Dorothy W. Brown in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a great niece (the latter two were nieces of George Waith Lee, which Marianne Lee Andrews confirmed by writing that Adele was "the widow of my late uncle, George Waith Lee"). The Petition for Probate of Will also mentioned Helen Melvin McCuen of Wilmington, Delaware, as a legatee and half-niece.66

So ends this story of George, Adele, and Etta, none of whom were born in the Evergreen State, and all of whom were buried in different states. But the evidence of their having lived here for twenty or more years, thankfully, survives.

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1 Frank Lee household, 1880 federal census, Buffalo, Ward 2, Erie, New York, enumeration district 169, page 5, lines 38-50; National Archives microfilm series T9, roll 831.


7 Okanogan County Warranty Deed, no. 41576. County Courthouse, Okanogan, Washington.

8 "George W. Lee Died Wednesday Morning," Okanogan Independent, 28 August 1926, p 1, column 4, paragraphs 5-6.

9 "Local Brevities," Okanogan Independent, 10 September 1909, page 2, column 3, paragraph 1.

10 George W Lee household, 1910 United States census, Seattle, King, Washington, enumeration district 120, sheet 15A, lines 18-19; National Archives microfilm series T624, roll 1660.

11 "Local Affairs," Okanogan Independent, 8 April 1910, page 4, column 3.


13 E. L. Ferdon household, 1910 federal census, St. Paul, ward 7, Ramsey, Minnesota, enumeration district 93, sheet 10A, lines 27-28; National Archives microfilm series T624, roll 720.

14 Etta L Ferdon household, 1905 Minnesota state census, St. Paul, ward 7, Ramsey, Minnesota, enumeration district 28, lines 72-73; Minnesota Historical Society microfilm F39, roll 146.

15 Etta L. Ferdon household, 1900 federal census, Ithaca, ward 2, Tompkins County, New York, enumeration district 152, sheet 3A, lines 27-30; National Archives microfilm series T623, roll 1169.

16 "Guild to Give Concert at the Three Buttes Ranch," Okanogan Independent, 17 April 1914, page 1, column 2.


19 "Orchardists' Excursion to Canada a Great Success," Okanogan Independent, 11 September 1914, page 1, column 5.


24 "Subscribe $11,000 to Liberty Loan; Local People Make Special Effort to Help," Okanogan Independent, 12 June 1917, page 1, column 1.


31 Okanogan Independent, 19 April 1919, page 5, column 3, last paragraph, reprinted from Riverside Tribune.


33 "Okanogan Victory Loan Subscribers," Okanogan Independent, 29 April 1919, page 1, column 3.

34 "Town and County," Okanogan Independent, 26 April 1919, page 3, column 3, paragraph 3.


37 "Tuberculosis Christmas Seal Sale is Now On," Okanogan Independent, 30 November 1920, page 1, column 6.

38 "They Saw the Prince," Okanogan Independent, 4 October 1919, page 1, column 6.

39 "Town and County," Okanogan Independent, 6 April 1920, page 5, column 3.


42 "Town and County," Okanogan Independent, 3 July 1920, page 3, paragraph 19.


46 "Town and Country," Okanogan Independent, Saturday, 24 June 1922, p. 8, col. 3, par. 3.
