

Anthony's story

My great grandfather, Anthony Lee, son of Michael Lee and Margaret O'Reilly, was baptized Antonium Lee in the Parish of Kilronan, County Roscommon, Ireland, in 1858.

Anthony left Ireland in the mid to late 1860's with his family for Scotland, where they settled in Leith on the east coast. The aftermath of the Irish famine and recurring economic depressions almost certainly led to their emigration. Economic uncertainty may also have disrupted Anthony's schooling in Ireland—in 1884 he signed the birth registration of his first child, my grandfather James Lee, with a cross.

In the 1871 Scottish Census 12 yr old Anthony Lee and his younger 10 year old John Lee were listed as 'soap makers' in Leith. Later Census records suggest that for most of his working life, Anthony worked on the Leith Docks, initially as a dock labourer, then with the advent of the steam ship as a coal trimmer. Working with his coal trimmer's wide bladed shovel, Anthony balanced coal in the hulls of ships in port at Leith Docks. Coal trimmers were also employed from Leith Docks to work on steamships travelling near and far, so he may well have been away from home for periods of time.

It's possible that the hazardous nature of working with coal dust in enclosed places contributed to later health issues and possibly to use of whisky as a coping mechanism for stress and anxiety. His son James' and great grandson John James' predilection for whisky can perhaps be related to being 'chips off the old block!' It seems though that he outshone them in this regard, with his daughter Lily's son Bill Tully remembering hearing stories of Anthony Sr drinking a bottle of whisky in a day (or, did he say, 'a day?!')

Twenty five year old labourer Anthony Lee married 20 yr old flax mill worker Barbara Sullivan at the Roman Catholic Chapel in Leith in 1883. The eldest daughter of Irish born police man Patrick Sullivan, and Mary Smith, a domestic servant, Barbara was born in Leith and appears to have benefited from the forward looking changes in education which occurred in Leith from the 1840's. When her second child, Patrick was registered, Barbara clearly wrote her own signature.

Evidence of Anthony and Barbara's life experience bears signs of the difficult times in which they lived. Of eleven children, only six lived to adulthood. Four little girls died of then prevalent childhood illnesses as infants or toddlers—Ann of nephritis and exhaustion; Mary Cecilia of measles and bronchopneumonia; Barbara Helen of diphtheria and Barbara Marie of convulsions. Anthony's 18 yr old third son Anthony died in 1908 of tuberculosis,

When Anthony Lee Sr died in 1917, only James, Patrick, Winnifred, Lily (Elizabeth), Phillip and May (Mary) were alive. Daughter Winnifred died in 1918 of eclampsia and heart failure, (it seems she was probably also weakened by tuberculosis according to her nephew Bill), while Mary (May) died in 1832 of aplastic anemia, also childbirth related. Bill remembers as a little boy watching his mother, Mary's older sister Elizabeth or Lily, rushing with the dying baby to the sink in the kitchen to provide a form of baptism. Second son Patrick died in

1932 of Lipol poisoning and fall injuries – apparently Lipol, present in the disinfectant Phenyle, was a common method of suicide. What a lot of sadness over many years. When bedridden Barbara died in 1837, only James, Lily and Phillip were alive—with James in Australia, in her latter years she lived with Phillip, with Lily visiting every day to cook and clean for them. Anthony's youngest son, Phillip also became known as 'Tony' – apparently as he looked very much like his older brother Anthony who died at 33 Cables Wind in 1908 of Tuberculosis, aged 18.

Anthony's childhood experience of the continuing aftermath of the Irish famine and difficulties in markets for the mining industries of County Roscommon was almost certainly followed by the mixed emigration experience of all emigrant 'boat people'. Who knows what the working conditions were for young Anthony as a child employed as a soap maker in Scotland? Being a member of the Irish Catholic community in Leith meant being able to cope with racist attitudes from outside this community. Economic depression and precarious employment meant at times industrial unrest, with two major strikes occurring during Anthony's working life on the Leith Docks.

World War I was into its third year when, in 1917, Anthony died in Leith of a heart. Who knows which of his many nephews were in action during the war, which others were employed on the Leith docks in protected occupations such as riveters involved in building naval vessels, which of his nieces became nurses, such as his brother John's daughter Catherine Lee (who later moved to Sydney with Australian soldier husband Percy Sheedy who she met in France during the war). The tragic Gretna train accident of 22 May 1915 would have impacted on Anthony, indeed all members of his family, including James and Rose in Australia. Three officers, twenty-nine non-commissioned officers and one hundred and eighty two soldiers of the Leith based 7th Battalion, Royal Scots were killed or burned to death. Thousands lined the streets of Leith for the funeral procession and burial at Rosebank Cemetery, the cemetery in which deceased members of the Lee family are buried. Perhaps not coincidentally, not long after this tragedy Anthony's eldest son, my grandfather James, a former member of the 3rd and 5th Royal Scots who had emigrated to Australia, enlisted in the Australian Army. James served for two years as a Lieutenant training signalmen at Perham Downs in England. In early 1918, not long after Anthony's death, James was posted to France where he served with honors, being mentioned in despatches and receiving a recommendation for the Belgian Croix la Guerre. His nephew, Bill Tully, remembers that 'the Lee family were always very proud of Uncle James'.

Anthony appears to have had many strengths. He retained work and a solid base in Leith for his family, who lived for many, many years at 33 Cables Wynde, which had 'three rooms with windows'. Anthony and Barbara had been married for 34 years when he died. He appeared to have been a practising Catholic, with almost all family 'births, matches and dispatches' recorded at the Roman Catholic chapel in Leith, so would have been part of Leith's Irish Catholic community. His children went to school, he supported my grandfather James in becoming a printer/compositor and was, with other family members, proud of James becoming a Lieutenant in the Australian Army. Had he lived, Anthony would have been so proud of my grandfather James being mentioned in despatches and also being nominated for the Belgian Croix la Guerre in 1918. Throughout his life, Anthony remained involved with his extended family, with brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces who often

crossed over as witnesses at weddings and registrations of life events or appeared at his home on Census nights as 'visitors'. He would almost certainly have shared in activities surrounding his nephew James 'Tancy' Lee's development and success as a world champion boxer! When tragedy affected the Ramsay family in the Leith community, 9 or 10 children were orphaned--Anthony and Barbara Lee were among the community members who each agreed to adopt one child, adopting Lizzie Ramsay. Finally, Anthony's heavy consumption of whisky could be viewed structurally. It is likely that whisky – culturally considered the 'the spirit of Leith' – was accessible both cost wise and geographically. Cables Wynd, where Anthony lived through most of his working life, boundaried the west side of the Lochend whisky distillery!

My great grandfather, Anthony Lee Sr b 1858 in County Roscommon, Ireland, d 1917 in Leith, Scotland, had clearly lived through difficult periods of history and industrial development and suffered and shared much sadness as a father, husband and community member. I would like to have known him.

Beverley Lee

A website on 'the Spirit of Leith' - http://www.smws.co.uk/your-society-adventure/article-archive/Remembering_the_Spirit_of_Leith.html

A website on the Gretna train disaster- <http://www.scotsatwar.org.uk/printerv/gretnagreen.htm>

This story was originally written as a project for my 'Creative writing of Family History' class.