

Below are my thoughts and memories on the Impact Dr. Robert E Lee had on my time as a student and throughout my career as a public school band director. Randall Winkey, Class of '76

So many of us knew this time was coming, but the passing of Dr. Robert E Lee has still hit hard. A Facebook group of students from my time at Wartburg have been sharing memories and lessons learned ever since we heard the news.

I played trumpet – class of '76 – so it's been 50 years since I first had Dr. Lee as a freshman. I actually knew Bob Lee much before my time at Wartburg as I grew up in Shell Rock and my mother knew him well as part of the "Stage Band" for the Shell Rock Swing Show. The show was created and directed by Lee's brother-in-law, Dr. Dale Everson, and many of those early productions were a result of teamwork by the two. I grew up watching him play in the band and on center stage in a variety of roles such as Harold Hill from "The Music Man" or as Snoopy from "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" among many others. So – I first knew Bob Lee as an entertainer and not as director of the Wartburg bands. In fact, I do believe it was his involvement in a rather amazing small town production that related to so many of us in this area. Here was a serious college director that could loosen up and really have fun with lighter music as well – and that signal was a clear message to so many of his students and future band directors that music should relate to the public in many forms.

I transferred to Wartburg in January of 1973 after meeting with Dr. Lee in November of 1972. He took this naive farm kid under his wing and encouraged me to experience life as a music major at Wartburg. That was certainly a decision that has impacted my life ever since. I was then a part of the very first European tour in 1973 and was so inspired by a director that could combine a serious love of good band literature with a bit of fun in the form of "Band-Aid Folies" that was staged every spring back then and also a part of our European tour program – much to the delight of our foreign audiences. The Band continued to strengthen each year during that decade – and I was honored to serve as Band president in 1975-76 as well as tour manager for our Colorado tour that year. Back before the advent of the cell phone, I sat many a day in Dr. Lee's office on the phone scheduling concert & host sites. His desk was always filled with boxes of raisins as his primary snack of the day. He insisted that the raisins and his daily dose of sardines flushed out his system and increased his odds of a long life. He was right!

Yes, Dr. Lee was well known for his REL-isms. A favorite of mine was "If you're on time, YOU'RE LATE!" There was a strong group of instrumental music majors during my years at Wartburg, and I have heard mentioned repeatedly how much that simple quote was a favorite with many of us continuing to use it to this day in our teaching. Others remembered are: "Don't let your studies interfere with your education!" and "We are in the air business". He also quoted his own mentor, Weston Noble of Luther College, quite a bit. A favorite was "You must place the emPHAsis on the CORrect sylLABLE."

Dr. Lee continued to inspire and advise well beyond my time at Wartburg. He served as clinician for my HS & MS Bands several times, he and Dale Everson were part of an interdisciplinary unit at my middle school at which they taught our kids to polka! The kids loved it! Yes, Bob Lee loved to polka and traveled to many polka fests. He occasionally rehearsed the adult band at Shell Rock, and we often visited following Wartburg Band concerts. A more recent memory was the year he turned 84 and we were enjoying a Brass Choir performance in the Chapel. He leaned over and randomly said "Ya know, my first students turned 80 this year". That rather mind-blowing statement caught me off-guard! Yes, he'd have been four years older than his first class of HS seniors:)

Dr. Robert E Lee – a true musician and lover of life who inspired generations of students to live life to the fullest. We continue to remember and use his wisdom on a daily basis. He was a great man who will so be missed.