

Chief of Chiefs



Robert Nathaniel Lee and the Mardi Gras
Indians of New Orleans, 1915-2001

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The *New York Times* obituary of Robert Nathaniel Lee, known as Big Chief Robbe, lauds him as “the first and only Chief of Chiefs of New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian tribes.”

Despite hardship and discrimination, Big Chief Robbe always found a way to do what he believed in—even if that meant using his fists to beat back bullies. When he saw the Mardi Gras Indians for the first time, he knew that he was going to be one of them. Joining the Mardi Gras Indian community at only ten, he quickly became known for his stunning sewing and singing abilities. By the end of his life in 2001, he had been the Big Chief of four different tribes, given a lecture at Yale University, and become a role model for generations of New Orleans black youth.

Author Al Kennedy draws on his personal relationship with the Chief and numerous interviews conducted over Big Chief Robbe’s last three years to illuminate the life of this great man.

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To
Eddie and June and Ben and June
and
Isaac “Mr. Ike” Edward,
whose recollections helped shape this story

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Big Chief Robbe, Robert Nathaniel Lee (left), sits with Big Chief Donald Harrison Sr. (right) in Harrison's Upper Ninth Ward home on August 13, 1998. (Photograph by Al Kennedy)

Introduction

That's why the present is here, because the past was carried right. The future dwells in the young fellow that remembers the past.

—Big Chief Robbe

Robert Nathaniel Lee sat across the dining-room table from me in Big Chief Donald Harrison Sr.'s Upper Ninth Ward home in New Orleans. It was August 13, 1998, the day I met the eighty-three-year-old Big Chief known as Robbe, the first Chief to be honored with the title “Chief of Chiefs” by the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian Council. Big Chief Robbe was on hand to add his recollections to Big Chief Harrison's life story. This interview and others would become the book *Big Chief Harrison and the Mardi Gras Indians*.¹

At the time, I did not realize my good fortune in being introduced to Big Chief Robbe, and I never expected a close friendship to develop.

Later, when I called Big Chief Robbe, it was not to discuss his long history in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition but rather to ask a very different question. Mr. Lee had lost his sight several years before I met him. Now living with his sister in New Orleans East, far from his familiar Uptown neighborhood, the once fiercely independent and ever-active Chief of Chiefs had no choice but to depend upon others; yet, he embodied serenity and joy. I started out wanting to know how he came to accept the loss of his sight and the other limitations of age and infirmity. I ended up learning about his strong spirit and the contentment that came from his deep spirituality.

He chose to defy the limitations of his blindness. “To be blind means you lost something, not everything,” he explained. “I just don't believe a person is supposed to give in to something bad, and losing your sight sure isn't good.”

Robert Nathaniel Lee, born May 21, 1915, had watched the elders since he was a little boy. Eyes wide open, curious, and focused, he learned from those who would have been born in the late 1800s. The more we

spoke, the more I grew to appreciate Mr. Lee's reputation for integrity. He carefully differentiated between what he had observed and hearsay. When asked a question about something he had not personally witnessed, he might preface his remarks with, "This is *I hear*"; it's not *I know*."

"If I don't know about it, you're not going to hear it from me," he said more than once.

On occasion he would start to say something, catch himself, pause, and say, "I'm not going to say that." I could only conclude that there were some memories entrusted to him by the elders that he did not wish to reveal, thereby keeping the secrets of a secret society.

At our first meeting, he clarified the spelling of the nickname he had been called for most of his life. "Would I spell it as *R-o-b-b-i-e*?" I asked. "No," he replied. "*R-o-b-b-e*." That settled it. That's how he will be known in the pages of this book.

Robbe was a man who could be believed. His reputation was meaningless if any part of it was built upon a lie. To that end I tried to ensure that I set down his words as he wanted.

Some of this material first appeared in *Big Chief Harrison and the Mardi Gras Indians*, and those instances are cited. However, since the focus is now on Big Chief Robbe, his quotations in *Big Chief Harrison* have been expanded with comments gleaned from other interviews that I conducted. The notes reflect this.

On several occasions prior to Robbe's death, I had the opportunity to craft the Chief of Chiefs' words into public statements and press releases. In each instance, I would first read the edited remarks to him for his approval. I also read to him parts of the corrected transcripts of our interviews. He approved them as well. It was in that context that I edited his comments for this manuscript.

When Big Chief Robbe discussed the same topics on different occasions, I combined his comments, uttered at different times, into single paragraphs so that his narrative would flow more naturally. To that end, I have eliminated the traditional ellipses for material omitted from our conversations. Rather than produce a lengthy list of footnotes on every page, I provided at the end of the book a complete listing of all the interviews and conversations that became the building blocks for this narrative; otherwise, more than four hundred footnotes would have been added to the text. I have tried to capture Big Chief Robbe's spirit and his voice, and this story is told in his voice as much as possible.

Robbe used the terms "gang" and "tribe" interchangeably when describing the group of men who come together to follow a Big Chief in the masking tradition. Therefore, both terms appear throughout the book.

Big Chief Robbe died on January 19, 2001. In the years since his death, he has never left my mind and heart. There have been times when, at a distance, I spotted a man slight of stature, head held high, walking with the assistance of a cane, maintaining a posture that suggested pride and purpose. Without thinking, I would almost call out to Big Chief Robbe, and then I would remember. With a pang of guilt, I had to admit to myself that the notes about his life I began compiling in 1998 still gathered dust.

Big Chief Robbe deserves to have his story told, at long last.

Chief of Chiefs

Chapter 1

Childhood

“Robert Nathaniel Lee!” Big Chief Robbe’s name was called at the first Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame ceremony, held in 1999. With the assistance of a friend, the elderly Big Chief slowly and carefully made his way down the ramp to the first landing behind Oretha Castle Haley Elementary School. The children, no longer able to contain their excitement, erupted in applause. They jumped up and down, straining to get a glimpse of Big Chief Robbe, the living legend their teachers had introduced to them through the school’s unique curriculum.¹

Following the awards, members of the audience joined the men and women honored at the ceremony. Crowding onto the ramp at the back of the school building, they filled its four levels and began to sing. The children on the playground added their loud, enthusiastic voices, and “Shallow Water,” a Mardi Gras Indian anthem composed by Walter Lomax, echoed through the neighborhood. Gripping his white cane to help him sense his surroundings, Big Chief Robbe, impeccably dressed in a brown suit, beige shoes, and beige hat, led the song as he danced.²

Much of the applause at the conclusion of the song was for him, but he probably didn’t hear it. The words of the song and the movement of his feet seemed to take him back in time as the decades fell away.

The Family Struggled but Survived

Robert Nathaniel Lee was born on Friday, May 21, 1915, to Olevia Hunter Lee and John Lee, a longshoreman—“a man that worked on the river all his life.”³ Robbe was the youngest of five children: Herman, Johnny, Oliver Joseph (called Joe), and Althea. According to Robbe, his father was born in Ama, Louisiana, moved to New Orleans, and worked hard to provide for his growing family. Robbe’s mother was from Ponchatoula, and his grandfather, Baily Lee, had been a minister. Olevia Lee shared her father-in-law’s religious beliefs with her family.⁴ She became the primary

spiritual influence upon her children. "My mother raised us in church," Robbe said. "She could stay home and cook, if she wanted, and tell you go to Sunday school, and you were going. 'Course, after I got to a certain size, I strayed from it, but I never forgot it."

The family struggled, but they survived. After working all day, John Lee taught his children to write the letters of the alphabet, and for fun he took them to Mardi Gras parades and other holiday and second-line parades. Robbe enjoyed standing on Rampart Street watching the annual Halloween parade organized by the Mystic Order of Hobgoblins, described by the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* as "one of the strongest negro organizations in the city."⁵

Robbe remembered that the men in the Hobgoblins parade sometimes wore electric lights in their hats, and there were floats, carriages, and, as a newspaper reported, "hard-working brass bands."⁶ Newspaper stories from 1914 report that the Hobgoblins' "chief purpose" was to "encourage the negroes to pay poll taxes and thus help maintain the public schools." A reporter covering the 1915 parade spotted a poster carried by one of the Hobgoblins bearing the message: "We pay our poll tax, do you?"⁷

Article 231 in the 1911 compilation of Louisiana revenue laws called for a one-dollar poll tax to be paid by males "between the ages of twenty-one and sixty years," ostensibly for "the maintenance of the public schools in the parishes where collected."⁸ The reality, as pointed out by historian J. Morgan Kousser, was that the poll tax, designed by "upperclass white Democrats," stripped the vote from those who could not afford to pay it, disproportionately disfranchising the African American population.⁹ It appears that paying the poll tax, as the Hobgoblins encouraged, helped support the chronically underfunded public schools and was an act of resistance against the intent of the Democrats.¹⁰

Robbe grew up hearing about the unnamed hurricane, later known as the "Great Storm of 1915," that swept through New Orleans in September 1915, a few months after he was born. It must have frightened his parents because he remembers them frequently talking about its extensive damage to the city as well as to the public school buildings. It happened so long ago that he couldn't remember any other details they mentioned, but he never forgot the sense of fear and urgency he picked up from them about storms.¹¹

In the early 1920s, John Lee, Robbe's father, organized boxing lessons for the neighborhood children in the yard of the home they rented at 3006 South Rampart Street. He roped off an area in the grass and bought boxing gloves for the children. He expected the children who knew a little bit about boxing to teach the ones who didn't. A former boxing instructor for the Dryades Street YMCA sometimes dropped by to give the children some pointers.

Robbe recalled that a short time later, a man he knew as "Fat" opened

up the Green River Club in a little building down the street from Robbe's house on Rampart, between Sixth and Seventh streets.¹² He gave the neighborhood children an indoor space to box.

The older boys helped organize the bouts, matching the younger boys according to size. All the boys in the Green River Club divided up, and each half would cheer for one of the boys in the ring.

As a child, Robbe had a strong sense of what was fair and right. Sometimes he had a nickel, and, following a tiring boxing match, he used that precious nickel to buy a "Jumbo," a large bottled soft drink. Surrounded by friends who begged him for a drink from the bottle, Robbe would first ask his former opponent if he had any money to buy a drink. "You don't have a nickel? Well, when I drink some of that Jumbo, you get the next [drink]. I know you're tired." His other friends got a drink from his bottle only if there was any left.

A childhood bout with diphtheria landed Robbe in Charity Hospital, which he described as a wood-frame building. He didn't remember the pain or discomfort, but he did remember wanting to get out and play. A nurse—a nun, he recalled—tried to get him to eat an egg, thinking it would be soft enough to go down without causing pain. When Robbe turned it down, the nurse assumed his throat must be too sore to swallow, but Robbe had other ideas.

"Give me red beans and rice," he told her. The doctor hurried in, believing the red beans would hurt Robbe's swollen throat, and he watched in surprise as the small boy wolfed down the food and cleaned his plate. His appetite convinced the doctor he was well enough to go home.

Robbe and his sister attended a small private school started by Virginia Barnes, described as "an educator of children and a pioneer in the field of social service work."¹³ Robbe remembered her as "Miss Barnes" when he was at her school, and he also knew her as Virginia Thompson (after her marriage to Moses P. Thompson, Sr.), "because she was the lady who built the first swimming pool for colored in the city of New Orleans, in Thomy Lafon's playground."

Indeed, Virginia Thompson headed a committee that provided this scarce recreational resource to the African American families of New Orleans. The pool was built when Robbe was nine years old.¹⁴ Nationally syndicated columnist Dorothy Dix, writing about Virginia Thompson, noted that "at her own expense she has gathered together hundreds of little children whom she has taught, clothed, fed, and mothered, and whose little feet she has set on the right road."¹⁵

It amazed Robbe that many of his friends didn't leave their immediate neighborhood. "I had plenty fellows had never been over Magazine Street

in their life,” he said. “And I had plenty fellows had never, never crossed St. Charles Street in their life.”

“They didn’t do it,” he explained, “because if you would come in that neighborhood, somebody [who knew] you were a stranger was going to tackle you.”¹⁶

Robbe must not have been too concerned about venturing outside of his neighborhood because he brought his friends from “Back of Town” to the swimming pool and proudly proclaimed to me that “nobody did them any harm.” He was soon bringing children from “Back of Town” together with children from “Front of Town.”¹⁷ It might be to swim in the pool at Lafon or swim in the Mississippi River. Some of the “bigger boys” would swim across the river, he said, while “the small boys just swim under the pier.”

In Robbe’s neighborhood, the abundance of fruit trees proved to be almost irresistible to the young boy. In his walks, he passed trees laden with persimmons, figs, lemons, grapefruit, and “grapes growing across the thing [trellis] in front of their house.” Sometimes, he recalled, the temptation was too delicious to resist, and Robbe ducked in when the homeowners relaxed their vigilance. More than once he had to dash back through a gate or climb over a fence, followed by an angry shout: “You little bad children! You better not come in my yard for no grapes.” He happily ran on down the street, clutching the sweet fruit.

He Began to Notice Wealth

From the time he was old enough to walk, Robbe discovered the many different versions of New Orleans that exist in people’s minds. He knew the streets, railroad tracks, and canals. He knew the landmarks, and he knew where not to go. He began to notice wealth because he didn’t possess any, and he quickly learned that people of wealth lived in a very different world than he did. Robbe sometimes walked on Canal Street by the Boston Club, an exclusive social club started in 1841. The Boston Club is “closely tied” to Rex, a prominent white social and Mardi Gras organization. All Robbe ever saw was “a big door.” He would never know the world on the other side of the door.¹⁸

“The Boston Club is a club like this: if your family wasn’t born millionaires, you can’t join the Boston Club,” Robbe said.

As he grew older, Robbe began to understand that many people had access to financial capital and connections with corporate leaders—avenues that were closed to him. Behind the doors of the Boston Club, members could find contacts to benefit themselves financially and

socially. “If you were in the market for an idea, go to the club [and] get a conversation that profited you,” he said. “And when you finished, you’d get the understanding of what to do.”

Lafon School: “A Big School with Plenty Children”

Robbe attended a very overcrowded Thomy Lafon School at 2916 South Robertson Street in New Orleans. In 1927, when Robbe was twelve, the school was bursting at the seams with 2,700 students, and an investigative report in the *Louisiana Weekly* called it “the largest elementary school in the world.”¹⁹ To teach the huge student population with a small faculty, the school platooned the students, who attended half-day classes in the morning or afternoon. “Oh, they had some children!” exclaimed Robbe. “It was a big school with plenty children.”

Among the Lafon School faculty were some members of the first generation after slavery.²⁰ Robbe’s first principal during his early grades at Lafon would have been Archie Ebenezer Perkins, the son of former slaves, “who had a scholarly interest in many subjects.” Perkins was a noted historian, essayist, and scholar.²¹ Two of the school’s faculty members, Andrew Johnson Bell and Samuel J. Green, would later have schools named for them.²²

The name of English teacher Jamesetta Humphrey stuck with Robbe because her nephews, Percy and Willie, played music with “one of the jazz bands,” he noted. “They went all over the world.”²³

One of Robbe’s friends at Lafon was Sing Miller, who was two years older than him. “Sing Miller’s right name was James Miller,” Robbe said. Traditional-jazz fans know Sing Miller as the talented man who played the piano with Percy and Willie Humphrey, and George Lewis.²⁴ “We shot Johnnies together,” Robbe said, referring to the game of marbles. When asked about Miller’s nickname “Sing,” Robbe replied that his friend “came up with that [as] far back as I can remember.”

Teacher Virginia Cornelius was “rough,” Robbe said. He explained that it didn’t matter what class you were in; if Miss Cornelius “caught you getting wrong, you went to your room with a bruised hand or a bruised butt, or something.”

“Some of the teachers didn’t just control *their* children,” Robbe stressed. “They controlled any child that they saw at the school that wasn’t doing right. You had to answer to them.” Miss Cornelius would order offending students to hold out their hands. “When Miss Cornelius whipped a boy, and she’d [try to] hit your hand and miss it, well, that made you get two licks.”

“I can tell you that because I was a bad boy,” Robbe continued.

“Two things I did plenty in school: held my hand out for the strap and stood in the cloakroom,” the small room adjacent to the classroom in which the students hung their jackets, sweaters, and caps. Robbe figured the cloakroom was where they sent you after “they get tired of beating on you.”

When Robbe got in trouble, his teachers pinned a note to his shirt. A school day could seem mighty long for a little boy waiting to go home and get punished. “And you better leave it there,” Robbe said. The consequences were worse if the note never made it home, because Robbe would be “in a world of trouble.” The frequent notes always summoned his parents to school for a conference.

As far back as 1851, the city’s public schools reported incidents when parents stormed into classrooms to confront teachers about the real or imagined problems their children created in school.²⁵ Robbe never had the luxury of having his parents believe him and not his teachers. “You didn’t go tell your mama that the teacher whipped you thinking [she] was going to go [to school] to whip the teacher,” he said. “You go tell your mama that the teacher whipped you. That means you get another whipping because you must’ve done something.”

Robbe knew it was in his best interests to remain silent about what happened to him at school. “You keep your mouth shut,” he said.

Robbe’s teachers punished him most frequently for fighting. He’d plunge into any battle in which he saw classmates from his neighborhood getting bullied. When older or bigger students grabbed sack lunches or money from his friends, he was fearless. “You’re not going to take lunch from him now,” Robbe would say. “He’s with me.”

The class bullies didn’t like that at all.

“I was always a little fellow and talked that kind of talk,” he said. Despite the fact that he was doing something noble, Robbe still had an endless series of notes pinned to his shirt.

Robbe could have avoided trouble by just going to a teacher and reporting the bullies, but that had other consequences. “If you go tell the teacher, then you were a weakling, you know,” he said. Doing it his way might have added a few more cuts and bruises, but it earned Robbe respect. “They’d start to fussing with me when I talked for another fellow,” he said, “but they wouldn’t hit anymore. They stopped hitting because I’d fight back.”

As a small child and as a man, Robbe was unafraid to stick up for friends, even when the odds were against him. His quiet courage became a hallmark of his life.

Many Reasons to Leave the South

In New Orleans, Robbe's parents had to navigate a difficult racial landscape, and the unconcealed racism posed a constant threat. In 1900, a heavily armed white mob had set Lafon School ablaze. They were out for revenge, as historian William Ivy Hair noted, because Robert Charles, "a Mississippi black man . . . shot twenty-four white people, including four policemen, before he was finally killed and stomped into the mud of the street."²⁶ Setting the school ablaze was the mob's consolation prize. They originally planned to burn an African American neighborhood and gun down those who fled the flames. The harsh racial climate lingered well beyond the 1920s, and John and Olevia Lee tried to survive within its toxic atmosphere.

Robbe's father had been born around 1883, and his mother in 1891, and they grew up in a perilous time, as the U.S. Supreme Court's *Plessy-Ferguson* decision in 1896 established the legal basis for separate-but-equal segregation. A new Louisiana state constitution in 1898 stripped more than 129,000 African American voters from the rolls in Louisiana, leaving fewer than 1,500 black voters by 1904, and the numbers steadily decreased thereafter.²⁷

There were many reasons to leave the South. John Lee could not have missed the *Chicago Defender's* frequent stories describing the freedoms and opportunities to be had in the North. An incredible network of mail subscriptions, Pullman porters, popular performers, and regular travelers distributed the *Chicago Defender* across the nation. *Defender* publisher Robert S. Abbott's "crusade to bring Southern Negroes north was perhaps the most gigantic project he attempted and his most noble achievement."²⁸

With 2,359 "agent-correspondents" across the country, including a "branch office" in New Orleans, the publication had many readers in the Crescent City.²⁹ According to Robbe, a man on Seventh Street, between Rampart (Danneel) and Saratoga, sold only one newspaper: the *Chicago Defender*. Each issue traveled through many hands, Robbe explained. As soon as one person put it down, another picked it up. "When I was big enough to know they had a paper, the *Chicago Defender* was right around the corner from us," remembered Robbe.

The dream of moving north must have preoccupied Robbe's father because he repeatedly told his family he was going to take them to Chicago. An uncle and an aunt already had made the move.

Everything Changed

Everything changed in little Robbe's life on August 18, 1925. It was a Tuesday, and Robbe received word that his father had collapsed.

John Lee was only forty-two years old when he died. The official cause of death was "Cardio Renal," and that unfamiliar medical condition robbed a ten-year-old boy of his father and his childhood. Robbe could barely comprehend that, in an instant, the strong man who had been his father was now gone.³⁰

The tragedy forced the Lee children to grow up too quickly. There was no safety net for the newly widowed Olevia Lee and her children. "No welfare," Robbe said.

Robbe's family lived on South Rampart Street (now Danneel), near Seventh Street. Robbe loved his neighborhood. It reminded him of his father, and he knew his many neighbors. Within two years of his father's death, his mother had to leave the neighborhood to find more affordable housing. She moved her family to 607 Josephine Street, near St. Thomas Street.

Although the rent was cheaper on Josephine Street, it was a new and strange neighborhood, and the Lee children were the new kids. Robbe endured several black eyes and many bruises before he was accepted.

"Very Few Youngsters Got Skates"

Every day was a struggle for Olevia Lee, but she tried to give her children a few slivers of joy, the few an impoverished mother could provide.

Robbe remembered Christmas through the eyes of a little boy. "No mother had to wake you up on Christmas morning," he recalled. "Mother had trouble trying to keep you in bed."

"Better go to bed because if Santa Claus sees you up, he's not coming in here," his mother warned. When Robbe and his sister still couldn't get to sleep, his mother would return and, in her stern voice, tell them: "You all are running Santy Claus away!"

"And you'd be laying in there fidgetin' all night," Robbe said.

Presents of any consequence came from the civic organizations that collected toys. The *Times-Picayune* sponsored the Christmas Gift Fund, which distributed toys to "negro children" at Pelican Stadium on Christmas Day. The Mystic Order of Hobgoblins also held a toy giveaway for "poor children of their race" on Christmas Day at the Masonic and Odd Fellows' Hall, 1116 Perdido Street.³¹

Robbe and his brother got skates one magical Christmas. Girls got

“dolls, jacks, and different things,” he said. “Smaller children got drums and horns. Very few youngsters got skates when they went through the doll-and-toy fund unless you knew somebody that was issuing out the toys. Boy, you had a present when you had a pair of skates. When me and my brother and sister finished with a pair of skates, they weren’t worth anybody using them.”

The Lees’ New Year’s Eve celebration included a family get-together, where “someone would make eggnog, put a little whiskey in it, [and] have fruitcake.” The celebrations also included firing pistols into the air. “We’d shoot in the air like they don’t want you to do now,” Robbe said. “At the time we were shooting in the air, everybody was shooting—police liable to take a few shots in the air then.”

The first day of the new year featured Olevia Lee’s “cooked green cabbage.”

“She’d cook either black-eyed peas or cabbage, and she would stew a rabbit,” Robbe said, explaining that the rabbit came from an uncle in Ama, Louisiana, who would bring two or three rabbits he caught.

Credit Was the Lifeblood of the Lee Family

The magic of the holiday season offered but a brief respite from the poverty Olevia Lee and her family faced. The Lee children had no choice but to find work wherever they could. Robbe said that Joe, his older brother, picked up money dancing with bands.

Robbe’s sister, Althea, in addition to keeping up the house, washed her brothers’ clothes. Her young hands became heavily calloused from hitting the clothes on the scrub board. She also sold charcoal and watermelon from her mother’s front door. Later she cooked and sold food from her mother’s kitchen. Brown gravy was her secret. Since most small eating places in the neighborhood served tomato gravy, Robbe’s sister parlayed her brown-gravy skills into a small diner at the corner of Race and Religious streets. Because she had store credit from the age of sixteen, Althea managed to supply her small restaurant with the fixings to serve breakfast and lunch to hungry workers in the nearby trucking and dredging companies, a bag-making company, and the Kahn Cotton Pickery.³²

Robbe’s mother worked full-time at the Home for the Incurables, a facility opened by ordinance in 1893 for those “whose medical or mental conditions were determined to be hopeless.”³³ Yet, Olevia Lee was listed as a laundress in the 1924 city directory.³⁴ Robbe explained that it was his oldest brother, Herman, who did the laundry work for the neighbors. He didn’t want his friends to know he was doing the washing and ironing, so

when the neighbors brought clothes, “it was supposed to be for my mama, but it was for him,” Robbe said.

Robbe described the small cast-iron furnace that sat in his mother’s kitchen. Every morning, Herman lit the charcoal in the furnace so he could boil the water to wash the clothes, and he used the metal grates on the top to heat his iron.

Credit was the lifeblood of the Lee family and the key to its survival. The Italian grocers in the neighborhood extended credit to the struggling widow, and Olevia Lee used all her available resources to pay on time. This was an era of *lagniappe*, a term meaning that little something extra the grocer might throw in to keep the customer coming back. The Lee children were particularly fond of shopping at the grocery store near First and Rousseau streets.³⁵ It was owned by Joseph Genovese, who, Robbe said, was “very good to the poor people.” When Mrs. Lee spent fifteen cents on grocery items, she’d be rewarded with an extra garlic or onion. The Lee children were more excited because they “got animal crackers or some kind of something for *lagniappe*.”

“Children used to want to run to the grocery because the grocer would give them the *lagniappe*,” Robbe said.

Robbe also came to know an older white couple he remembered only as Mr. Tom and Mrs. Marie. Their children played with the Lees, and they “sold candy and stuff” from their house. “I used to like to go there because when they cooked, I’d eat with them,” Robbe said.

“The Best Thing the Black Boy Could Do Was Lose that Fight”

Many decades removed from their childhood, Robbe and his sister, both in their eighties, were in the living room of their home. The television was showing the movie based upon John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Mrs. Smith occasionally described the different scenes to her brother, who listened intently, immersed in the story that his sister’s narrative helped bring alive in his sightless world. The story of the Joad family during the depression reminded them of their difficult days picking strawberries.

Even prior to her husband’s death, Olevia Lee had to pull her children out of school during strawberry-picking season, usually in the months of March, April, and part of May, and they traveled to Ponchatoula to make extra money. The work became desperately necessary after John’s death. “We went to Ponchatoula with my mama and picked strawberries every year after my daddy died,” Robbe said. “As soon as strawberry season was over, I was right back to New Orleans.” He hated the work in the fields,

and it seemed to him that the racial climate in Ponchatoula was even worse than in New Orleans.

Robbe remembered a grudging acceptance between the races in the New Orleans neighborhood of his childhood. One day, a white boy hit Robbe, so Robbe hit him back. The white boy's father rushed out of the house to see what was going on.

"I flew," Robbe said. The other boy's father lurched out of the yard and chased Robbe. "When I got to my house, I swung in my gate," he said. The other boy's father shouted at the hastily retreating Robbe. "'You better had run in your gate.' And my Pa said, 'You godd--- he better had, or I'd beat your ass like he beat your boy's ass.'" Sometimes these issues were handled within the neighborhood.

"Well, you couldn't talk like that in Ponchatoula," Robbe said, bringing the story back to his strawberry-picking days. There was a different attitude in the rural areas.

In 1924, in Amite City, Louisiana, about twenty-four miles from Ponchatoula, six Italian men were executed—hanged to death—for the murder of a man in Independence, Louisiana, a conviction based on what historian John Baiamonte, Jr., described as "circumstantial evidence." Robbe remembered hearing about the incident, from the arrests of the six men in 1921 to their execution in 1924. Amite, like Ponchatoula, where Robbe and his mother and brothers and sister picked strawberries, was in "Bloody Tangipahoa," the name given in the 1890s to the violent Louisiana parish. It was once home to a chapter of the Knights of the White Camellia and later the Ku Klux Klan. Lynchings of African Americans, and later, Italians, were not uncommon. Stories of anti-immigrant violence rarely made it into the local newspapers because the economy depended upon the labor of Italian immigrants.³⁶ Local strawberry farmers recruited Italians to come in and pick strawberries, and they didn't want to scare them away before they got there. They were needed but they were disliked and distrusted.

In 1921, Ponchatoula town marshal Ed Tucker apprehended one of the men accused of the murder in Independence and said: "No Dagoes allowed down here."³⁷ Robbe would come to know Ed Tucker all too well.

Robbe, around nine years old at the time of the execution, remembered "wagonloads of furniture and everything getting out of Amite, because the way they [the white residents of Amite] talked, they weren't going to just kill the six; they would have killed all the rest of them."

From New Orleans to Ponchatoula, the event invaded the lives of the children. "It was an uproar for a long time," Robbe said, "at school and everywhere else."

Against the backdrop of “Bloody Tangipahoa” and the very real danger to an African American family, Olevia Lee returned every year with her children to pick strawberries in Ponchatoula, and the Lee family lived at a boardinghouse run by a German friend. “He was a man that knew our mother when she was a girl,” Robbe said.³⁸ The Lee family also stayed in “Mr. Sullivan’s” boardinghouse on Railroad Avenue.

Olevia Lee taught her children strict survival skills: “There were areas where blacks didn’t go. And you didn’t go there.” Robbe’s sister was strolling along a boarded walkway in Ponchatoula when her friend suddenly grabbed her arm and, in a terrified whisper, begged her to step off to let a white family pass them. Not comprehending the situation, Robbe’s sister was slow to move, so her friend roughly pushed her into the street. This was a new world for the Lees.

One man who loomed large in Robbe’s childhood was Ed Tucker. Robbe had heard that Tucker was a man to be feared in Ponchatoula. He was the town marshal, and he could “ride a horse like a cowboy.” According to Robbe, any altercation between a black man and a white man had better end with the black man leaving Ponchatoula before “Sheriff Ed Tucker” arrived.³⁹

Robbe repeated a story involving “Miss Wanda,” whose son got into an argument with Ed Tucker, and the marshal vowed to whip “him with one of them big ol’ whips.” Miss Wanda’s son allegedly “knocked Ed Tucker off a horse with the brick.” The next thing Robbe knew, Miss Wanda and her son were long gone from Ponchatoula. Robbe heard they were in Detroit.⁴⁰

Robbe said that a drugstore near the train station was a place of sanctuary for African Americans. The man who ran the drugstore was “a white man, but if a black man got into a confusion with white people and ran in there, you better not come in there.” If the drugstore owner ordered anyone to “‘let you alone,’ he meant it,” Robbe said.

In New Orleans, Robbe explained, “you could hit a white boy or anybody else who would hit you.” In Ponchatoula, young Robbe learned that “if a black boy and a white boy had a fight, the best thing the black boy could do was lose that fight.” If he won, the white boy’s family would go to Ed Tucker, and Tucker would “catch the black boy and beat the pants off of him.” When people saw Ed Tucker walking with that whip held loosely in his hand, “that meant he was looking for someone to whip.”

One Mother’s Day in the mid-1920s, young Robbe, wearing his best clothes, happily skipped along a Ponchatoula street, often looking down proudly at the red rose pinned to his coat. Without warning, a white boy rushed up, grabbed the flower from Robbe’s lapel, threw it down, and taunted him by saying: “No n----- don’t have no living mother.”

“I slapped him,” Robbe said. The boy’s face “turned like fire” from the

impact of Robbe's small hand. "I didn't know black children couldn't fight white children," he said.

Word spread, and a friend's mother hurriedly brought Robbe to Mr. Sullivan's boardinghouse, where the Lee family was staying. Mr. Sullivan shuttled Robbe to the safety of the drugstore, where the man who seemed to be in charge asked Robbe for his side of the story. Robbe fearfully related the incident, describing how the white boy crumpled up his nose. "I just slapped the stink out of him," Robbe had admitted. The man told Robbe to go on home and not worry about it. Several weeks later, Robbe froze in terror when he looked up to see the white boy pointing at him and telling Marshal Ed Tucker, "That's him."

"I see him," said Tucker, but nothing happened. Well into his eighties, Robbe believed that the man in the drugstore told Tucker, "Don't mess with him."

"All the fellows told me how lucky I was," Robbe said.

The Lee children found the hot and difficult work in the fields as oppressive as the racial climate they had to endure in the town. Their nimble fingers should have been shooting marbles or adjusting skates, instead of plucking strawberries under an unforgiving Ponchatoula sun. Robbe hated it. His sister hated it. She even told her mother that when she had children of her own, she would never make them pick strawberries because the work was so hard.

Over the years, Robbe and his sister often talked about the many indoor chores and outdoor jobs that needed to be done to keep the Lee family sheltered, clothed, and fed. One of the most poignant memories they shared was of laboring inside and looking outside where other children were playing. At an early age, they grimly realized that this is what they had to do, and they reluctantly would turn away from the window and resume their work.

"I Don't Want You to Cut Half Your Foot Off!"

Childhood was a puzzle for Robbe, and into his eighties, he still wrestled to understand some events that happened many years before. One time, he was a young boy walking home. What made the day special was that he had on a new pair of shoes. It started to rain, so he carefully took off his shoes, tied the laces, draped the shoes around his neck, and happily jumped in every mud puddle he could find all the way home.

When he reached the door, his mother snatched the shoes from around his neck, threw them in the corner, and started whipping him. To his cries

of “Why?” his mother said, “I’d rather you’d wear the shoes and protect your feet because in the water are fish-eels and broken glass, and I don’t want you to cut half your foot off!”

She went on: “I’d rather have a son with a whole foot, so I bought the shoes for you to wear, so wear them!” Robbe felt hurt from trying to do the right thing. He was a small boy, and he could not begin to understand the worries a young widow might have caring for her family and keeping them together. Robbe had never seen one of those eels his mother was so afraid of, but he heard plenty about them. “That was an old eel that looks something like a snake but they said were blind,” he said. “I never come in contact with any of them in mud puddles. It was a thing that lived in the mud.” As an elderly man, he still nursed hurt feelings from the unjustified whipping.

Then he thought again of shoes. This time he was almost eight, and as he walked along peering in shop windows, a pair of dress shoes caught his eye. He’d watch the men who had the money to buy them, and he’d say, “When I get big, I’m going to buy me some shoes like that.”

His older brother got a job, and “he paid six dollars for a pair of shoes!” Robbe exclaimed. The shoes were for Robbe. “They looked just like men’s shoes!” he remembered with delight. “I loved my brother. He was a very contrary fellow, but I loved him in the grave for those shoes. They looked just like a man’s shoes,” he said again. “I thought I had everything in the world when I had them on.”

“Put a Little Coffee in It . . . and That Was Whiskey”

There was no rest for Olevia after strawberry season. When Robbe was about thirteen, his mother “moved back in the area she always liked to live in,” finding the Lees a place between Danneel and Saratoga at 2005 Philip Street. Olevia took any job she could find to feed her children and pay the rent. “My mama started giving suppers on Friday and Saturday to make ends meet,” Robbe said, and she continued this for many years.

The meals were inexpensive, and the neighbors “got plenty to eat.” People bought suppers from their neighbors with the expectation that when a fundraiser was held at the other person’s house, the neighbor would reciprocate. “If you were a good enough sport to spend at their house, they would come to your house and spend and maybe bring somebody,” Robbe said. Every dollar counted, and Olevia assigned Robbe and his siblings specific duties. Since he couldn’t cook, Robbe helped clean up. Often the suppers lasted to midnight or later.

The first part of the preparation involved cooking. Rice was cheap, and Robbe said his mother could easily “buy enough rice to feed fifty people.” The menu might include red beans or fried fish; however, the beer and hard liquor were as important as the food because drinks were not included in the cost of the supper. Stocking enough liquor for the evening’s entertainment was key to the success of the event. New Orleans was in the grip of Prohibition, but as historian Joy Jackson noted, “bootlegging, both amateur and professional, began to develop on a large scale.”⁴¹

Olevia brewed her own beer because malt, yeast, and sugar were still available despite Prohibition. Robbe and his brothers and sister washed the empty bottles and capped the full ones.

Olevia ordered the strong liquor from neighborhood bootleggers. Robbe said his mother bought the whiskey from Mr. Joe and his wife, Miss Lena, who “sold alcohol on the corner of Eighth and Rampart,” about eight blocks away from their home on Philip Street. “My mama would tell him she wanted two gallons and pay him after the supper. He’d hurry up and bring it there.”⁴²

Robbe remembered that Mr. Joe had been arrested several times for selling alcohol, and he served a few of his sentences in the federal jail in the Old Mint, which opened in 1932. The *Times-Picayune* reported that when the Old Mint was used as a prison, it could “house 350 prisoners,” most of whom would be “prohibition violators with sentences running from 30 days to six months.”⁴³

“All they wanted was to have some fun and have some drinks,” remembered Robbe. Every drink sold—a half-pint of alcohol and water served in a small milk bottle for thirty-five cents—meant a little more income for the Lees.

Robbe watched as his mother bought the clear alcohol and poured it into different bottles. “When the alcohol mix was right, that was gin,” he said. “And you put a little coffee in it, turn it brown, and that was whiskey. Then you mix some cherry juice, and they called it cherry bounce.”

Music caught the ear of anyone walking down the street and it drew them into these suppers. “If you had a piano, you would do a better business,” Robbe said. The music added to the atmosphere, and the men might hang around spending that extra thirty-five cents for each drink as long as the music played. After Robbe’s father died, his mother extended her credit an astronomical amount by buying a player piano. “You could play it with your hand and you can play it with the rolls,” he said. “Pump it with your foot.”

Hanging around, always watching, always learning, Robbe eagerly picked up techniques from the various piano players who stopped by

now and again to play for his mother's suppers. His mother knew a lot of people, and some of the "fellows from around the neighborhood who were good piano players" would stop in and play for free drinks. Robbe knew that several of the men played piano in taverns and the houses of prostitution in his neighborhood. The notorious Storyville had been closed since Robbe was two years old, but that didn't wipe away the vice. It just scattered it around. Historian Al Rose noted that within a year of the last gasp of Storyville, "there were streetwalkers and houses of assignation throughout New Orleans."⁴⁴

Robbe keenly observed everything in the neighborhoods where his mother had to move the family. He saw open prostitution around his home on Josephine Street, and he saw it around Philip Street. When the police began to arrest too many prostitutes in the French Quarter or other areas, the prostitutes moved Uptown. "They came in my area," Robbe said, "and the women had big, open houses and pianos in their houses where the girls would work until things cooled off downtown. Then they'd go back home."

Robbe learned very early to withhold judgment, because he grew to understand that circumstances make people do things they ordinarily might not do. "Several of the ladies were relatives of mine," he said, speaking about some of the prostitutes in his neighborhood. "Good jobs weren't easy to find."

Robbe's mother was determined to steer him through a treacherous childhood landscape that included gamblers, bootleggers, pimps, and prostitutes. And Robbe was just as determined to learn from the piano players who entertained the paying customers at his mother's suppers. If a man was on the piano, Robbe lingered nearby. There was a man named "Pinetop"—a "tall man"—who now and again stopped in to play piano for the free drinks. "He made a couple of records, he did," Robbe said. Other transient piano players were just vague memories. There was a "Carl" and a "Frank," he said, then he paused. "Aw shucks, it's been so long . . .," he said quietly.

"I'd watch people play that knew how to play—no teaching—and when there wasn't anybody around, I'd get on the piano and see what I could do. And I'd always make up something of my own," he said.

Robbe's mother's phonograph supplemented the entertainment from the piano at the suppers. In those days, Mr. Scott, a man in a horse-drawn wagon, would come by selling records. "I'll never forget him," Robbe said. "He came around, and he sold you records on time. Everything cost about fifty cents, but you got your four or five records. He would come around every Saturday and collect the fifty cents or a dollar or whatever you wanted to pay on what you owe."

Robbe's mother bought a variety of blues records featuring the piano and the guitar. He explained that "the people in general back in those days liked the blues." His mother had records by Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters.

She also bought records featuring Louis Armstrong. The supper crowd seemed to like that. A family friend who had spent time with Armstrong in the Colored Waif's Home years earlier often came by the Lee house to visit and buy the suppers.⁴⁵

"He Wasn't Too Big for Me to Bust in the Head with a Brick"

Robbe made it through fifth grade at Lafon Elementary School and, perhaps for reasons of his address change, transferred to McDonogh 6, located at 4849 Chestnut. "Well, I started at McDonogh 6, and I didn't like it," he said. "That's when I quit going to school." This was around 1928, when he was twelve or thirteen. "I played hooky that whole year," he said.

What Robbe lacked in book learning he made up for in common sense. He started walking away from "wrong-doing fellows." Peer pressure meant nothing to him. He was not very big, but he was smart, and he wasn't held back by fear. He remembers when he began to feel this spirit of independence. "I started feeling like that when I was around ten, eleven years old," he said, which corresponds to the time of his father's death.

Neighborhood boys, lolling around the street corners because they had no place to go, played checkers using bottle caps. "Every corner where the good boys played, the bad boys showed up every now and then with their bad ideas," Robbe said.

One of the tough kids, the leader, would move in close to the younger boys, telling them: "We're going to do such and such a thing to so and so. Who wants to go with me?"

"And these fellows were scared to say no," Robbe recalled.

Robbe wouldn't budge. "I said, 'No, not me, man,' [and] the bad fellows would get mad." Unafraid, he offered the younger boys a way out. "You don't have to, if you don't want to," he would say. "Tell him you don't want to go."

"So that meant me and the bad fellows didn't get along so good," Robbe said.

He stood his ground against their threats. "I was smaller but I wasn't ever afraid. I was one of those fellows like David," Robbe said, referencing the boy in the Bible who killed Goliath. "I figured the fellow might be too big for me to beat with fists, but he wasn't too big for me to bust in the head with a brick or something. It's best he let me alone. And they let me alone."

At this point, while telling his story, the elderly man leaned back against

the padded headrest of a chair in his sister's home in New Orleans East. One hand clutched the blanket stretched over his lap, while he used his other hand to adjust the glasses he still wore despite the fact that his eyesight had left him long ago. Robbe paused his story as his mind lingered in his childhood years. Finally he said, "In my time, you had to have a good understanding. Your understanding was better than being a big fellow with big muscles, because you knew what to say for yourself." This meant saying no, not just once, but again and again.

There would be times when Robbe would court trouble, but more times than not, he found his way back to the right path. He learned from the bad examples set by older men who should have known better. "I saw so much of other fellows that I couldn't see me living that way or doing those kind of things," he said.

"And as I grew older, the fellows whose life looked wrong to me, I grew away from them—not to them. I never let a fellow's wrongdoing look good to me. If it was wrong, it was wrong," he said.

"I always thought about [how] my daddy was dead, and my mama was living," Robbe reflected. "And she had no money to get anybody out of jail. The best I could do was try to stay out."