



William S. Lee

WILLIAM S. LEE

1929–1996

Elected in 1978

“For leadership in the development of large multi–purpose electric power projects in an economical and environmentally compatible manner.”

BY ROBERTA BOWMAN AND LYNNE HOLMES
SUBMITTED BY THE NAE HOME SECRETARY

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA at Charlotte (UNCC), an original mural commemorates the man for whom the engineering school is named—William States Lee III. Because the artist found it impossible to capture his essence in a single image, she used more than a dozen likenesses to convey the spirit and energy of his character.

Like the mural, Bill Lee’s life was a composite of many skills and interests—he was a consummate engineer, a visionary leader, and a generous giver. Before his untimely death in 1996 at the age of 67, he left indelible impressions on the people whose lives he touched, on the profession he embraced, on the industry he served, and on the world he lived in.

The Engineer

Bill was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1929, and you could say engineering ran in his blood. His grandfather, William States Lee Sr., had helped found, and was chief engineer of Southern Power Company. The company, later called Duke Power and eventually Duke Energy, became one of the world’s largest and most respected energy companies.

Lee III graduated from Princeton University with a degree in civil engineering, Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude, in 1951. He served in the U.S. Navy Civil Engineering Corps during the Korean War and returned to Charlotte with his bride, Janet, in 1955.

Bill joined Duke Power in 1955 as a junior engineer—a choice inspired more by the chance to work with the company’s nationally renowned chief engineer, David Nabow, than by a desire to follow in his grandfather’s footsteps. Bill planned to stay with the company for a few years and then start his own engineering firm or look for a position in another, more exciting industry. But what started as a job led to a lifelong passion for Duke Power and the energy industry.

By 1965, after a series of promotions, Lee had become vice president of engineering. He was elected to the Board of Directors in 1968. He was promoted to senior vice president of engineering and construction in 1971, executive vice president in 1976, and president and chief operating officer in 1978. In 1982, he became chairman and CEO, and in 1994, when he retired, he was named Chairman Emeritus.

A registered professional engineer in North Carolina and South Carolina, Lee was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1978. Throughout his career, he received many other awards and honors. He was elected a Fellow of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) in 1972 and was awarded the ASME George Washington Gold Medal also in 1972, the Outstanding Leadership Award in 1981, and the James N. Landis Medal in 1991. He was named the Nation’s Outstanding Engineer by the National Society of Professional Engineers in 1980; he received the American Nuclear Society Walter Zinn Award in 1980 and the Henry DeWolf Smyth Award in 1991. He was named Outstanding Utility CEO of the Year eight times and CEO of the Decade in 1989 by *Financial World* magazine.

The Leader

Bill Lee’s career paralleled an era of intense growth in the U.S. electric power industry. Duke Power was challenged to keep pace with the Carolinas’ accelerating economy and the region’s growing need for electric power. His grandfather, William States Lee Sr., had acted on the belief that the company could build its own generation fleet more economically and efficiently than any outside contractor. Bill Lee continued that

“do-it-yourself” tradition. Throughout his tenure at the company’s helm, Duke Power was known for excellence in designing, engineering, building, operating, and maintaining its own power plants.

In 1962, Bill Lee was named chief engineer for the first commercial nuclear plant in the Southeast, Parr Nuclear Station in South Carolina. Under his engineering and executive leadership, the company brought seven nuclear generating units on line in the 1970s and 1980s—three at Oconee Nuclear Station in South Carolina, two at McGuire Nuclear Station in North Carolina, and two at Catawba Nuclear Station in South Carolina.

Bill Lee believed passionately in the potential of nuclear energy to provide electricity and promote peace. By reducing the world’s dependence on oil-producing nations, he believed, nuclear energy could reduce the probability of going to war over oil — while strengthening national economies and protecting the environment by reducing emissions.

After the Three Mile Island (TMI) accident in 1979, the industry called on Lee to lead the recovery efforts. Amid national concerns over the safety of nuclear power and facing political calls to shut down nuclear plants, Bill Lee offered a better solution. Instead of closing plants, he argued, the industry could learn valuable lessons from the TMI experience, an idea that led to the creation of the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations (INPO), an industry group dedicated to self-monitoring performance and improving safety. Lee served as INPO’s first chairman from 1979 to 1982.

After the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, Lee took the INPO model global. Recognizing that “radiation knows no national boundaries,” he helped form the World Association of Nuclear Operators (WANO) to improve the safety of nuclear reactors around the world. He served as WANO’s president from 1989 until 1991, which helped establish his reputation as a global ambassador for nuclear safety. Lee became so closely identified with progress in nuclear safety, efficiency, and reliability that he was often called “the world’s nuclear engineer.” But, never one to grow complacent, he often said that “laurels wilt fastest when sat upon.”

To employees at Duke Power, his personal style and strong sense of service and citizenship exemplified Bill Lee's leadership. Nearly every employee who worked at Duke Power during the Lee years has a story to tell. For example, Lee once stopped to help an employee who was having car trouble in the parking lot of one of the power plants—and the employee didn't know until later that the nice gentleman who helped him get back on the road was the CEO. Lee made a point of sitting with an employee's mother on an airplane to let her know what a fine job her daughter was doing for Duke Power. He recalled a casual elevator conversation with a new employee years later—and asked about each family member by name.

The Giver

Bill Lee also embraced the ethic of community service. He never joined a board or accepted a leadership position in name only; he always gave his full energy and attention to the cause at hand. Like his many professional awards and honors, Lee's philanthropic efforts are too many to list. He championed the arts, chairing the fund-raising campaign for the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center in Charlotte in 1989–1990. He served as trustee on a number of hospital foundations, volunteered for the Boy Scouts, and was an elder in his church.

Lee was also strongly committed to the economic development of the Charlotte region and the Carolinas. He chaired the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce in 1979 and was appointed by the governor to the North Carolina Economic Development Board and the North Carolina Energy Policy Council.

He had a strong commitment to educational reform, particularly in his home state. He turned down a prestigious board seat at Princeton in favor of a trusteeship at Queens College, telling his alma mater, "I'm honored, but I've got this little college up the street in my neighborhood that needs me more." Lee chaired the Queens College Board of Trustees from 1985 to 1989 and served on the boards of the UNCC Foundation, North Carolina State University's Engineering Foundation, and Johnson C. Smith University Board of Visitors.

At Duke Power, he established the Power in Education Program to give employees paid time off to volunteer in schools. He sparked the creation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation to raise funds for innovative programs in the local school system. His commitment to educational excellence led UNCC to name the college of engineering after him in 1994. And the day before he died in 1996, he addressed the North Carolina state legislature, calling for a stronger commitment to education in the state.

Bill Lee was a man of unending curiosity, creativity, and commitment. Of all his pursuits, none was more important to him than his family. He and his wife Janet raised one son, States, and two daughters, Lisa and Helen. His wife and children survive him and live in the Charlotte region, along with five grandchildren: Lisa Lee and Alan Morgan's children Grace and Will; and States Lee's children Madison, States V, and Martin. During the final year of his life, Lee made the grandchildren his priority: fly fishing and horseback riding together in Wyoming; swimming and sailing at Camp Lee, the family homestead on Lake Norman, just a few miles north of Charlotte.

"I love to be really active in the challenge of creating something worthwhile," Lee once said. "Now that could be conquering a mountain skiing downhill, growing a garden, raising money for a charity, or staying on the cutting edge in the pursuit of excellence at Duke Power." The thrill of competition included Lee's leisure interests as well. His family and neighbors remember the "Camp Lee Olympics," which Lee directed every Fourth of July for his extended clan on the shores of Lake Norman. Or, as his wife Jan remembers, the dare of an "even larger garden" every year. Jan recalls that Bill Lee wanted to "leave the world better than he found it" — and that applied to his company, his community, and his family:

"A colleague asked me what I'd most like to be remembered for," he said on another occasion. "My response was, 'a person who helped others achieve more than they could have without me.'"

Life's mission accomplished.