

Tom Lee: A Hero's Tale

Tom Lee's exploits are the stuff of local legend. Here's the story of the man behind the myth.

By Michael Finger



Tom Lee

In less than a minute the boat rolled over, pitching the young woman and her fellow passengers into the river. The current was swift, the water surprisingly cold. The riverbank seemed impossibly far away, and there was nothing in the water to grab hold of. Frantically, she kicked and splashed in a desperate effort to stay afloat.

It was no use. She had no life preserver, and her heavy, waterlogged dress twisted around her legs. When she tried to scream out, the muddy water gushed into her throat, choking her. Struggling feebly, she slowly sank, until only her long blonde hair trailed on the surface of the brown stream ...

In a flash, a muscled arm thrust into the water, gripped the woman by her hair, and awkwardly yanked her into a tiny boat. Spitting and gasping, she looked up into the face of her savior, a black river worker named Tom Lee.

Lee became a national celebrity in 1925, when he pulled more than 30 people from the swirling waters of the Mississippi River after the steamer *M.E. Norman* overturned near Memphis. Today, his brave deeds are largely forgotten, brought to mind only when visitors pause to admire the two monuments — one old, one new — erected in the riverfront park named after him. This is the story of Tom Lee, a true Memphis hero.

On the sunny spring morning of May 8, 1925, Tom Lee cranked up the outboard motor on the battered wooden boat he called the *Zev* and headed downstream. The 39-year-old roustabout was employed by C.W. Hunter, a Memphis company doing levee repair work along the river. Lee served as a jack-of-all-trades for the firm, and his job today was to ferry his boss downriver to Helena, Arkansas, and then return to Memphis. It would be an easy task, though any work on the water had a special danger for Lee — he had never learned to swim.

Two other boats, both much larger and grander than Lee's craft, also pulled out of Memphis that morning. They were the *Choctaw* and the *M.E. Norman*, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers vessels converted to a special use that day. The Mid-South Chapter of the American Society of Civil Engineers was holding its first annual meeting in Memphis, and the Engineers Club of Memphis had arranged a special outing for the convention delegates. The two boats would be used to carry more than 150 engineers and their families to view the big revetment project under way at Pinckney Landing, some 20 miles south of the city.

A little before noon, both vessels pulled into the channel and slowly chugged downstream. Only one would return.

The *Norman* was a sternwheeler, 114 feet long, with twin smokestacks and two decks. Less than a year old, the ship was modern in every way, and the inefficient coal-burning system originally installed on her had been converted to oil just a few weeks before. In fact, this would be the *Norman's* first voyage using the new system, which replaced the coal bunkers in the hold with huge tanks carrying tons of fuel.

It was also the first time the *Norman* had ever carried passengers. The ship was designed as a towboat, with accommodations for a small crew. But on the morning of May 8th, with her new oil tanks filled to capacity, the *Norman* took on the additional weight of 72 passengers.

Captain Howard Fenton was a capable riverman who had worked on dozens of ships up and down the Mississippi for 39 years. If he thought the *Norman* was overloaded as the men, women, and children clambered aboard, he never said so. He might not have known better, for today was a special day for him. Fenton had just been transferred to this boat. He had never piloted the *Norman* before.

Leroy Hiding Jr. was a young passenger on the *Norman* that day. In an interview years later as part of the University of Memphis' Oral History Project, he recalled an ominous vision the morning of the voyage:

"My father, grandfather, and I went down to get in the car. And before Daddy could start the automobile, I jumped out of it, and cried, 'Daddy, I don't want to go. The boat's going to sink!' But my father and grandfather said, 'Son, the boat's not going to sink. You're just needlessly scared, and it's all in your head.' So he took my hand and we went down to the river."

Some of the other passengers weren't quite so confident. As the *Norman* headed downstream, small waves kicked up by the *Choctaw* steaming ahead steadily washed over her lower deck. One passenger, alarmed by the way the ship wallowed in the river, found little reassurance from a crewman when she showed him the water spilling over her feet. "Yes, ma'am, I know," the crewman responded, "and we're mighty concerned about it."

Despite the apparent danger, the leisurely voyage south was uneventful, and both boats tied up at Pinckney Landing on the Arkansas side by noon. Most of the men left the boats to scamper over the revetment work — huge mats woven from willow branches that kept the river from chewing away the mud banks — while their families lingered on board and snacked out of box lunches.

Meanwhile, just a few miles away, Tom Lee's day had turned sour. Moments after he dropped off his passenger and turned the *Zev* back to Memphis, the little engine coughed and began to misfire. Muttering to himself, Lee let the boat drift back to the dock, where he tied it off and pulled the cover off the motor. He knew he had better tinker with it now, before he hit the treacherous current upstream from Helena.

At the landing, the brief inspection tour was over, and the engineers boarded the *Choctaw* and *Norman* for the two-hour return trip home. Henry Wilkinson, a convention delegate from Washington, had ridden the *Norman* downstream, but he felt a strange urge to change boats. He stepped aboard the *Choctaw* just as it moved away from the banks and pointed its bow upstream.

Back at Helena, Lee yanked the starter rope of the *Zev* and whistled as the motor fired up and hummed smoothly. He had worked on the engine for an hour, but he would be home soon now, he thought, as the *Zev* pattered north. Far ahead of him upstream, he could barely make out the smoke of two steamers.

The *Choctaw*, lighter and faster than the *Norman*, soon left the other ship behind. Two passengers on the *Choctaw*'s upper deck looked back at the slower ship until they lost sight of it around a bend in the river. As the *Choctaw* steamed for home, no one aboard her ever suspected the *Norman* was in trouble.

But Tom Lee certainly did. He had zipped past the big steamer a few miles above Pinckney Landing, and saw that something was wrong. The *Norman* seemed to be wrestling with the current, listing to starboard with her lower deck awash. Lee cut the motor on the *Zev* and watched the boat over his shoulder, thinking he had better keep her in sight. As he later put it, "She was riding serious."

Aboard the *Norman*, Captain Fenton fought to maintain control of his boat. After leaving the landing, the boat had developed a slight list to starboard. The captain knew that on occasion the current would cause that, but he was worried. Other boats he had piloted always righted themselves after a while. To his consternation, this boat heeled over and stayed there.

Fenton calmly instructed the passengers to move to the high side of the vessel in an attempt to balance her. This strategy slowly leveled the boat, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Then, the ship began to tilt again, and the list gradually grew steeper until passengers could no longer keep their footing on the slanted decks.

Fenton now knew the ship was doomed. The crew rushed to toss out life preservers and anything else that would float, as the captain heaved the wheel over — perhaps there was time to reach the Mississippi shore before capsizing.

He was too late. Under the strain, the rudder failed and the boat was caught crossways in the current. The powerful current swelled against the hull, already heeled over at a dangerous angle, and lifted the port side of the vessel clear out of the water. In seconds, the *Norman* rolled over in midstream, trapping dozens of passengers in the screened-in main cabin, and hurling the others into the murky water.

Some of the luckier passengers had donned life jackets. Others struggled in the cold water to reach pieces of lumber, chairs, driftwood — anything that would hold them up. A few managed to splash back to the upturned hull of the *Norman*, but this provided only a brief refuge. The ship floated upside down for only five minutes before plunging to the bottom.

Seventy-two men, women, and children were at the mercy of the river. The chilly water was numbing. Heavy suits and dresses made swimming almost impossible, and the terrible current rapidly swept them downstream. Several of the passengers, injured when the ship overturned or unable to swim, drowned almost immediately. Others splashed about frantically in the water until they were exhausted by their struggles. Some tried to make it to shore; one man was seen to swim within 20 feet of the bank, when he suddenly threw his arms over his head and silently sank beneath the surface. Most of the passengers could do nothing against the swift current but bob helplessly in the water.



As soon as he saw the *Norman* turn over, Tom Lee whipped the *Zev* around and raced to the scene. He realized that the people in the water could easily swamp his little boat, so he expertly maneuvered it between the victims so he could reach them one at a time. Lee hurriedly filled the boat with eight half-drowned passengers, then carried them to a sandbar and returned for more.

Despite their predicament, most of the passengers floating in the river stayed surprisingly calm. Later Lee told a reporter, “They didn’t lose their heads like a lot of crazy folks I’ve seen in the water. I guess it’s a good thing they didn’t or I sure would have got scared too. The sensiblest drowning folks I ever saw — just waited for me when I waved at them, and I caught them in the *Zev*.”

Captain Fenton had leapt through the pilothouse window when the *Norman* flipped and had dog-paddled over to a bundle of life preservers. Worn out by his efforts, he could barely hold his head above water before Lee pulled him aboard the *Zev*. Another passenger was able to swim close to the banks, but the rough current kept pushing him away. Unable to move, he knotted his tie around a willow by the shore and moored himself there by the neck until Lee could get to him.

The last passenger Lee pulled from the river was a prominent Memphis society girl named Margaret Oates, who managed to stay afloat by popping open her parasol and trapping air beneath it. (This clever lady later married cotton merchant Hugo Dixon, and the arts patrons would later open their home, The Dixon Gallery and Gardens, to the city.)

Tom Lee eventually saved 32 people, and only a dozen or so of the *Norman*’s survivors made it to shore without his help. The disaster also produced other heroes that afternoon. Crewman Roy Thompson remained in the engine room and drew off steam so the boilers wouldn’t explode when the water hit them; he drowned at his post when the ship sank. M.G. Overstreet, an Ole Miss student, swam safely to shore, then dove back into the river to rescue at least seven other passengers. Engineer A.E. Fry assisted Lee during his later trips by lying across the bow of the *Zev* and pulling people into the boat. Another engineer, E.H. Bowser, helped his companions into Lee’s boat but refused to get in himself. He swam off to aid a woman and child nearby and was never seen again.

After Lee had made four trips to the sandbar, he paused long enough to gather driftwood and build a fire for the survivors, who were shivering from both the shock and the cold. Then he went back out on the river. “I beat it out in the *Zev* again,” Lee recalled later, “looking around the banks below, because I know a lot of them had gone and got drowned.”

By now news of the tragedy had reached Memphis. One of the passengers had stumbled through the cotton fields to a nearby farmhouse, which luckily had a telephone. His call brought doctors, ambulances, reporters, and funeral personnel rushing to the scene.

When the *Choctaw* finally reached Memphis that afternoon, more than a thousand people were anxiously waiting for her at the dock. Her passengers were stunned by the terrible news — they thought the *Norman* was just behind them. More doctors, along with relatives and other concerned citizens, including Mayor Rowlett Paine, jammed aboard the vessel as it steamed back to where it had last seen the *Norman*. And far downstream, other boats now headed north, alerted to the disaster when floating wreckage, life preservers, and a huge oil slick drifted past them.

The *Norman* survivors were returned to Memphis that night aboard the *Choctaw*, and they talked to the newspapers about the mysterious black man who had saved them. Reporters were eager to find Tom Lee, but they couldn’t find him. Lee was still out on the river. Even after other ships had arrived at the scene from all directions, he remained in the *Zev* and helped search for bodies until morning.

Twenty-three passengers were missing, and the authorities were determined to recover the bodies. Many of the dead were probably trapped in the ship, so professional divers were brought in from St. Louis to explore the wreck. The *Norman*’s hull was located by morning, lying on its side in 50 feet of water, but the divers were repeatedly swept away by the swift current. They could not even get close to the ship.

Plans were next made to raise the vessel by looping huge chains under the hull and winching it to the surface, but again the current made this impossible. Instead, the authorities decided to free the bodies — if there were any — by ripping apart the sunken vessel, using an anchor as a grappling hook. Over the next few days, large chunks of the boat's superstructure were pulled up, but no bodies appeared.

It was somber, horrible work, tearing the broken ship apart as grief-stricken relatives watched and waited for bodies to float to the surface. *The Commercial Appeal* was grimly poetic as it described the salvage: "That the rescue fleet is engaged in a solemn task is in the air; the isolation, the sound of the swirling waters, the sight of wreckage from the *Norman* coming to the surface, and the realization of the scenes that must be faced later all tend to impress upon one's mind the horror of the disaster."

(In that same issue, the newspaper took advantage of the "horror of the disaster" to sell ads for insurance. A large advertisement, suitably bordered in black, asked, "Were you a passenger of the ill-fated *Norman*? If any passenger lost in this unfortunate accident had a Commercial Appeal Continental Accident Policy, the beneficiary would receive \$5,000 as provided in Part One, relative to Steamboat Wrecks. And only \$1.00 per year provides this protection to readers of *The Commercial Appeal*.")

The salvage work on the *Norman* was slow and tedious. At one sweep of the anchor a brightly colored bundle of cloth burst to the surface, drawing a gasp from onlookers. But it was not a corpse, only the *Norman*'s ten-foot flag, still tied to the stern mast.

Later that day, a portion of the galley wall was tugged loose, with the attached wall clock stopped at the exact time of the sinking: 4:50 p.m. Exactly one week to the hour after she sank, the *Norman* was blasted apart with dynamite in a final attempt to dislodge any bodies. None appeared. Authorities made morbid studies of the river current's possible effect on a floating body, and determined the likeliest places along the banks for the *Norman*'s remaining victims to collect. *The Commercial Appeal* urged its readers to keep a sharp lookout, and some of the bodies were recovered far downstream, as predicted. Other victims of the *Norman* disaster remained lost forever.

And what of Tom Lee during all this? A quiet and considerably bashful man, he seemed genuinely embarrassed by the spotlights now focused on him, and modestly claimed, "I guess I didn't do any more than anyone else would have done in my place." Oh, but Memphians couldn't agree with that. Tom Lee was our hero. He was taken to meet the mayor, and newspaper photographers posed Lee in the rumpled clothes he wore during the rescue, shaking hands with Mayor Paine and standing in the equally famous *Zev*.

Tributes and tokens of appreciation poured in from *Norman* survivors and many others impressed with Lee's bravery. Captain Fenton wrote a letter to *The Commercial Appeal*, in part justifying his actions that day, but still declaring, "Lee deserves the greatest of credit for the manner in which he handled his motorboat and saved the lives of at least 25 people."

One of those Lee saved, J.M. Wood, summed it up neatly: "We all owe our lives to Tom Lee. That's all there is to it." Julius Goodman, the Memphis jeweler, presented Lee with a handsome gold watch. Lee also traveled to Washington to meet President Coolidge, who shook his hand and echoed others' sentiments that he was a "real hero."

The Commercial Appeal urged that Lee be awarded the Carnegie Medal for heroism, and not to be outdone, the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* declared, "We do not know what the rule of the government is about giving pensions to civilians, but if there is no rule against it, Tom should be made comfortable for life. And if there is a precedent against it, then this is a favorable time to break it."

Tom Lee became everyone's idol. The African Methodist Church passed this resolution: "We hail you as the patron knight of this new age of chivalry and heroism, and extol your manly virtue as worthy of the best heart of your proud but humble race. Shine on, Tom Lee, shine on!"

Amid all this grand posturing with mayors and medals, someone finally asked Lee what he wanted, and he had a ready answer: a house. So the Engineers Club of Memphis, which had lost so many members on the *Norman*, kicked off a campaign to raise funds to buy a home for the hero. People made donations ranging from ten cents to hundreds of dollars. Mayor Paine presented Lee with \$10; Margaret Oates, the girl with the parasol, donated \$100. James Kilgore, a 9-year-old boy from Mississippi, sent in his gift with a scrawled note: "Here is 50 cents. I am a little farmer boy and widow's little boy, but I wanted to send something to help out, so I sold my pet hen and here is the money."

In a matter of weeks, enough funds were raised to buy Lee the small brick house, still standing at 923 North Mansfield. He was also given a more secure — and considerably safer — job with the city's sanitation department. Lee was made a garbageman, earning 20 cents per hour. Now today that hardly seems a generous reward for a hero, but in the 1920s, it was perhaps the best job an unskilled black laborer could get. At any rate, he worked there for the next 20 years.

When Lee was granted early retirement in 1948, the city allowed him a pension nearly double what he would have ordinarily received. And every year, from 1925 until his death, the Engineers Club gave him \$50 and a gift at Christmas.

Tom Lee died of cancer in 1952. His wife, Margaret, who lived with him on Mansfield until his death, moved to California and died there in the 1970s. Mayor E.H. Crump decided the hero deserved a more appropriate tribute than the segregated, blacks-only swimming pool on Ayers that had been named for Lee in 1942. (Naming a swimming pool after a man who couldn't swim, a man involved in a drowning disaster, had always struck some as a rather odd token of appreciation.)

So, with Boss Crump's endorsement, Astor Park at the foot of Beale Street was renamed Tom Lee Park, and the city fathers erected a 30-foot granite obelisk there in 1952 to commemorate the good deeds Lee performed back in 1925. Few visitors to Memphis in May events and other activities in the park probably took the time to read the inscription and its outdated tribute to "A Very Worthy Negro." When the stone shaft was damaged during the 2003 windstorm dubbed "Hurricane Elvis" it was replaced by a stunning bronze sculpture by Wyoming sculptor David Alan Clarke, showing Lee pulling one of the *Norman* survivors into the *Zev*. The new monument, the centerpiece of an illuminated plaza dedicated to Lee, is a far more impressive reminder of one man's bravery during a day of tragedy almost 90 years ago.

Another monument to Tom Lee stands in Memphis. It's considerably more modest, and for that reason it's one that Lee probably would have preferred. In a quiet, shady section of Mt. Carmel Cemetery on Hernando Road is a small gravestone that marks the final resting place of this Memphis hero. The stone makes no mention of the *Norman* tragedy, but is inscribed simply:

TOM LEE
Feb. 18, 1885
April 1, 1952
LEAD ME IN THE PATH OF PEACE

Shine on, Tom Lee. Shine on.