

Mysterious Mr. Lee

starts to look like hoax

By Lynn Ludlow

Evidence is stacking up to support the theory that a hoax artist of uncommon ability was behind last month's mystery of an elusive "W. B. Lee" and his safety deposit box in Wisconsin.

Questions are being asked discreetly by postal inspectors and Naval Intelligence, angrily by an elderly expatriate from Russia who now lives in Switzerland.

In the Maryland Market at 300 Turk St., a bearded man boasted that he had set up the whole bizarre sequence as a little joke. Nobody believed him, but somebody phoned the Examiner with an anonymous tip. Braggart and tipster were probably the same man.

The pattern was familiar. First, a factual foundation is laid (a man brags about his role in the hoax). Then comes an anonymous tip, part of which is provable (sure enough, a man was heard bragging), which lends plausibility to the unprovable part about secret documents, unknown identities and overseas spies.

Under the hoax theory, the joke was on Greyhound attorneys who wanted to see if the box contained papers that might explain why bus driver Douglas Moore fainted on Nov. 3, 1973, causing a crash that killed him and a dozen Reno-bound passengers.

It was no joke to Moore's sister, Mrs. Joyce McGowan, who flew from Hayward to Hudson, Wis. to check the box. She and her mother wanted to find out if the safety box contained a brown envelope Moore supposedly handed to a "W. B. Lee" in October, 1973.

Who "Lee" is or how he fits in has yet to be determined.

"They didn't find a damn thing," Mrs. McGowan said.

An anonymous tipster had informed Greyhound about the envelope, said to contain Moore's medical papers. Greyhound was intensely interested as the firm faces \$40 million or so in damage suits, and wanted to determine if any medical problems were concealed.

Also hornswoggled were the Hudson Wis., bank which had raised rates on "W.B. Lee's" box rental over his protests; a federal judge in Minneapolis who refused "Lee's" appeal; the local judge who presided over the anti-climactic opening of the box (no documents were found), and assorted officials, members of Moore's family and reporters for a good many publications and broadcasters.

The only character still smiling is Robert J. Milavetz, "Lee's" mail-order attorney in Minneapolis, who says he was paid a retainer large enough to cover his legal work thus far.

Milavetz said he was visited last week by an agent of Navy Intelligence, presumably because anonymous tips to newspapers had identified "W.B. Lee" as a Navy spy named Dimitri Tchkotoua.

This came as a surprise to local folks in the Social Register, who recognized Tchkotoua as one of their own. It came as a bigger surprise to his father, Prince Nicolas Tchkotoua, a Russian emigre who once lived here with his wife, the late Carol Marmon, an auto heiress.

From Lausanne, Switzerland, the elder Tchkotoua cabled and phoned the Examiner to deny that his son had set foot in the United States since 1955. As Dimitri was then 7 years old, it didn't seem likely that he was the mystery man who had rented the bank box in Hudson, Wis., in 1960.

A few days later, another

transatlantic phone call came to Willis Miller, editor-publisher of the weekly Star-Observer in Hudson, Wis. It was "Lee," who had called twice previously.

"My name is Zourab H. Tchkotoua," he told Miller, naming an older brother whose age better fits the facts.

"My grandfather left me a tidy sum of money," he added.

But the grandfather is very much alive and, as they say, kicking.

"He must be nuts," said Prince Nicolas. "Completely ridiculous. Ridiculous."

Miller said later that

"Lee's" phone calls, although supposedly from London, were interrupted on occasion by odd remarks from operators. Such as, "Your three minutes are up; please signal when through."

Postal inspectors began checking the episode after an anonymous tipster informed the Examiner that Dimitri Tchkotoua had rented Box 324 in the Berkeley Post Office in 1971, using it to forward CIA mail to "Lee."

The tipster described himself as a postal employe, which alerted writer Caro-

line Drewes. A man with a similar voice had phoned bogus society tips in the past, she noted.

Postal inspectors confirmed that the provable part of the tip was true. Box 324, although rented by someone else, has been used recently to forward mail for "Lee" to Minneapo-

lis and Wisconsin. An investigation is underway.

In Minneapolis, attorney Milavetz maintains that his client is Zourab Tchkotoua — but he admits that he has never met the man.

"Lee" also rents a post office box in Columbia Heights, Minn., home base for a hoax that gained national attention in 1972.

According to a plausible but phony report that was widely reported in the news, a baby's circumcision was bungled by a "mohel" — a ritual circumciser frequently employed under Jewish religious practice. It raised a lively controversy over the question of whether doctors should handle such operations.

Was it the same hoax master? When will he strike again?

"It makes you wonder," said Milavetz.

