

# Colbern Family <sup>1</sup>

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In 1865, W.H. Colbern finished his journey from Virginia, Kentucky, Warrensburg and Pleasant Hill, settling his family of four daughters and two sons on a farm a mile and a half northeast of downtown. W.H. started a grocery store on East Main Street, which he later closed to found a bank with Josiah N. Hargis that would become the Bank of Lee's Summit.

The family eventually moved to Belton in 1885, except for son Henry. Henry married Ms. Bertie Wright and settled on a farm near the site of the present Prairie Lee Lake. On June 26, 1895, their only child, William Henry Colbern, Jr., was born. Because of his shock of red hair, the child was given the nickname "Red".

After graduating from high school in 1913, Red decided to be a soldier, entering Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, VA, then transferring to the engineering department of the University of Virginia. He continued to advance up the ranks, serving as a trainer of military science and excelling as a member of the military equestrian team. As a military attaché, Red was in Warsaw, Poland, during the 1939 Nazi invasion. Two weeks after Pearl Harbor was bombed, Red was promoted to full colonel and was in charge of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division Artillery, earning his first star as brigadier general.

At the end of the war, Gen. Colbern became camp commander of Fort Chaffee, Ark. In 1952, the general was sent to Korea to command the IX Corps Artillery and remained there until the armistice was signed in July of '53. In 1955, he was promoted to major general and returned to Fort Chaffee where he retired a year later, bringing an end to a 39-year military career.

A U.S. military camp in Korea was named after him five years after his death.



## Dead ends

As far as anyone knows, Red Colbern never returned to his hometown. He was living in Chester, Ark., just north of Fort Smith, when he suffered a massive heart attack and died at the Fort Chaffee post hospital on April 30, 1959, at the age of 63.

According to obituaries written at the time, he was to have been buried in the Elks cemetery [sic] in Laredo, Texas, but when Col. Colbern checked with the Elks, they said they had no record of Red having been a member of the Laredo Elks Lodge. His burial site remains unknown.

Col. Colbern also has run into a dead end concerning the general's immediate family. Although he knows he had a wife named Mary, and his daughter, Beverly Anderson, was married and living in Frankfurt, Germany at the time of his death, he has been unable to locate either of them to bring to

life the man he only knows from photographs – a thin, handsome man, unsmiling, with close-cropped red hair and an English-looking mustache.

Last July, while visiting Seoul, South Korea, Col. Colbern stumbled across an article in a magazine that mentioned a Camp William H. Colbern, located about 15 miles southeast of the city. After checking with other Colbern relatives, who had never heard of the camp, he decided to pay it a visit. Col. Colbern describes the camp in a report he wrote when he returned to California:

“Camp Colbern is situated ... at the mouth of a beautiful valley, on the east slope, along Highway 3, south of the Han River and two miles south of Tougae. The valley runs north and south with a beautiful stream traversing its lower portions. A tour around the facility revealed the beautiful setting further and an opportunity to see a tremendous view from the athletic fields and helicopter pad.”

Dedicated in 1964, the camp originally was used as an artillery post and in 1977 became home to the 304<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion. It includes a chapel, recreation center, gymnasium, playing field complex, dining hall, swimming pool, post office and library.

“I am sure that Gen. Colbern would be justly proud of Camp Colbern and all the activities that go on there,” Col. Colbern wrote.

Col. Colbern said one of the nice things about researching the general’s life was getting to know distant relatives like Chris Colbern, who he didn’t even know existed. As close as he can figure, Chris is his fifth cousin, but when he recently saw a picture of him, he noted the strong family resemblance.

“My son and Chris are almost dead ringers,” he said. “They look damn near exactly alike.”

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a *Lee’s Summit Journal* Newspaper Article, November 12, 1990, by Ken Hatfield