



# THE JERRY LITTON STORY

By Cordell Tindall

**THE CLASSIC SUCCESS STORY** of a few decades ago featured a poor boy of humble origin winning fame and acclaim, despite apparent unsurmountable obstacles. The Horatio Alger story, they called it.

Jerry Litton lived such a story. The shy country boy from Lock Springs, Missouri, shed all inhibitions to win both fame and fortune — early in high school and the University of Missouri-Columbia and later as a millionaire cattlebreeder and new breed of politician.

Literally adored by farm people, he also was comfortable in more sophisticated urban circles. Show people, industry executives, political leaders, they all sensed that here was a young man with drive and ambition who was going places.

More important was the way the general public reacted to this young man with the burning ambition. They accepted what he had to say. He converted nonpolitical people into earnest crusaders.

Then, at the very moment of his greatest success, as it became obvious on election night August 3 that his margin of victory in the Democratic primary race for the U.S. Senatorial nomination was far greater than his most enthusiastic boosters had dared predict, the entire Litton family died in the flaming take-off crash of a twin-motored plane at the Chillicothe airport. Jerry, his wife, Sherri, and the two Litton children, Scott and Linda, all were killed. The plane's pilot and his son died, too. The group was headed for a victory celebration in Kansas City.

**FEW EVENTS IN MISSOURI** have had such an emotional impact.

The legend of Jerry Litton now is emerging, at times somewhat embellished. The stark facts are remarkable enough. How could he win 46 percent of

the vote, carry 98 (of 114) Missouri counties, in a race with two formidable opponents blessed with better-known names and better-known records?

Political analysts now are reviewing the factors in the campaign. But no analysis of what happened can take into account the energy displayed by this 39-year-old farm boy. Nor his confidence. Early polls showed him trailing, but he was never discouraged. He had his own timetable.

In fact, it appeared he lived by a timetable of his own design all his life — up to that last awful moment. He once said his goal was to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives by the time he was 35. He was. He needed money to further his ambitions. He was a multimillionaire when elected U.S. Representative from the 6th District, thanks to the success of his Charolais beef cattle operation. (The cattle ranch, which he owned with his parents, was sold when he went to Washington. He suggested he wished to avoid any conflict of interest.)

**THE LITTON LEGEND** got its start on a farm near Lock Springs, not far from Chillicothe, in Northwest Missouri. Jerry frequently recalled his humble origins, the adversities endured by his parents, Charles and Mildred. Jerry was not born in a log cabin; he called it a three-room house.

But by the time he was in Chillicothe High School (he went there to get vocational-agriculture courses), things were looking up for the Litton family. A larger farm had provided money to build a larger, comfortable country home. As a Future Farmer of America he had both beef cattle and swine projects. A Hereford bull he owned gained a noteworthy four pounds a day on a feed test. A litter of orphan Duroc pigs was raised on synthetic milk, an innovation at

Jerry and Sherri Litton came to Columbia in February to kick off his winning campaign for the United States Senate before a packed house.



the time, and six of the litter won eight blue ribbons at the 1953 Missouri State Fair.

The shy Jerry was encouraged by his agriculture instructor to take public speaking, and from then on, as he confessed, he never quit talking. He impressed his peers so that he was elected state president of the FFA, later was named secretary of the national FFA. Once, visiting industrial sponsors he made news by jittersbugging with Mrs. Harvey Firestone.

**HE ENTERED** the state FFA public speaking contest and for once came in second. (The writer was one of the judges.) But as the state's alternate he won the regional FFA contest, then the national.

Next came college training — at Mizzou. Here were new worlds to conquer. But by now Jerry was in such demand as a speaker with engagements across the nation that at times going to classes was somewhat of a sideline. In fact, a sympathetic Ag School official stretched the rules on class attendance a bit to keep Jerry in good graces. His new career was almost too successful. He was offered a job selling advertising for the national FFA magazine at what appeared to be a magnificent salary. But wiser heads prevailed, those of school officials and his parents, and Jerry graduated in ag journalism in 1961.

Jerry then surprised those of us watching his career and returned to Chillicothe to go into a farming partnership with his parents. No planting corn or feeding hogs — his return to the farm was done with his usual flair and style. He began to breed and promote Charolais beef cattle, the new, larger cattle from France. Jerry was ahead of the crowd and soon he had won a reputation for having one of the top Charolais herds in the nation. It was never clear if Jerry made Sam the Bull famous, or vice versa. Anyhow, it was a winning combination.

Jerry married his high school sweetheart, Sharon Summerville, but you can't say they settled down to the typical farm life. The showplace farm owned by a wealthy lumberman, Ralph Smith, came up for sale at Chillicothe and the Littons bought it. They later added a lovely home, complete with office space for the growing beef operation and closed circuit television in the bedroom for surveillance of calving heifers — with an occasional check on Sam in his red carpeted barn. Litton loved dance bands and built a band stand in the basement of his home. He also had a complete bar, but he remained a teetotal-

er even after going to Washington, a remarkable accomplishment.

Over the years, his University had given him numerous honors, including the Citation of Merit and the Faculty-Alumni Award from the Alumni Association. He, in turn, continued to be a supporter of his alma mater, serving for a time on the Alumni Association's Board of Directors and the Communications Committee, which directs the *Missouri Alumnus*. He seldom missed a home football game. Now, a scholarship fund has been set up in his memory in the Development Fund. His parents also are planning a memorial near his home in Chillicothe.

**WHILE STILL IN COLLEGE** Jerry was bitten by the political bug. He was elected student body president and then headed up a Youth for Symington Committee to promote the presidential aspirations of then Senator Stuart Symington.

Observers of the Litton Legend knew instinctively that he would enter the political arena on his own, someday. He was still going about the country on speaking engagements. So when Bill Hull, of Wes-



Lori Borgman

ton, did not choose to run in the Sixth District, Jerry entered the race, with a big field of candidates. He won, of course. The beautiful Sherri was his campaign manager.

Jerry developed the highly popular "Dialogue with Litton" television program, 30 minutes selected from 90-minute sessions with national personalities. To everybody's surprise he regularly attracted crowds of more than 1,200 people to the Sunday afternoon programs near Kansas City. He edited the programs, himself, again using skills learned in college. He not only selected lively exchanges, he was able to stimulate them. Few politicians could stand the close scrutiny of the television camera lens. Jerry was at his best here, holding his own with such notables as Hubert Humphrey, Shirley Chisholm, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Jimmy Carter, and Earl Butz.

The second congressional election was no contest. Jerry had as much support from Republicans as from Democrats. Yes, he was a political animal but of a new breed. He never relied on the old-line political organizations. He ran his own show, scarcely mentioned he was a Democrat. And in the Senatorial



As the national secretary of the FFA, Jerry conversed with former President Harry S. Truman.

In his popular "Dialogue" TV show, Litton interviewed national personalities of both parties. Here he talks with Jimmy Carter.



race literally thousands of Republicans asked for Democratic ballots, all with one reason in mind.

This Senatorial race was, of course, his biggest challenge. He knew he lacked statewide recognition. It took money to get television time and exposure. The polls would show that after people watched his TV show, he had their support. An estimated \$1.2 million went into the campaign, at least half of it his.

**OF COURSE**, he still would have had high caliber opposition in the general election. But Jerry's supporters felt that this was but another step on the way to the top. Undoubtedly, the final goal was the White House.

The Litton Legend is difficult to exaggerate, and, surely, it will grow. Hopefully, it may inspire other shy farm youths to dream big dreams. I'm glad I was around to see and record his career. Seldom has sweet triumph taken such a bitter turn. What a tragedy and what a loss for America. □

*Cordell Tindall (BS Ag '36), a nationally recognized farm journalist, was a longtime Litton friend.*