

George Washington Litton, 1910 to 1989: A brief biography¹

Joseph P. Fontenot*² and Gary L. Minish†

*Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA 24061; and †Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901

©2009 American Society of Animal Science. All rights reserved.

J. Anim. Sci. 2009. 87:2–4



Figure 1.

George Washington Litton was very intelligent, a perfectionist, and may have been a genius. Litton was a conscientious, kind, and considerate person. He was a great stockman, statesman, communicator, teacher, and livestock industry leader. Litton had a deep in-

terest in livestock, especially as the industry benefited people. He always had a deep interest in young people (students). Most of Litton's professional efforts were in applied aspects of animal production, but he had a deep interest and respect for basic scientific aspects. Litton was a traditional animal husbandryman with a true love of livestock. His ultimate interest was the impact on the consumer. Litton had the respect and admiration of farmers, ranchers, educators, researchers, extension specialists and agents, and livestock producers throughout the state of Virginia and the nation.

Figure 1 HERE. George W. Litton was born in Lee County, near Pennington Gap, VA, on February 22, 1910. He was reared on a general livestock farm where his father produced one of the leading herds of pure-bred Hereford cattle. He attended Elk Knob Junior High School and Lee Baptist Institute. He enrolled at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI) when the only entrance requirement, according to George, was to find it. He earned his BS degree in 1931 and the MS degree in 1940 in animal husbandry from VPI. Later he did graduate work at Oklahoma State University.

After completing his BS degree, Litton was employed as assistant county agent in 3 counties in Virginia. In 1932 he became the first county agent in Tazewell County and served until 1939, when he went to Blacksburg to do graduate work at his alma mater. Professor Litton did a great job as county agent. Litton was very effective and popular with farmers, known for being very considerate, kind, and good humored. One day as he was hurrying to the next farm (probably at 15 to 20 miles per hour), a rooster got in the way and was seriously injured. He picked up the rooster, brought it to the lady of the house, and apologized profusely for injuring the bird. She looked at his automobile and asked, "Is that the car you were driving?" and he replied that it was. Her response was, "If he couldn't outrun that vehicle, he would be worthless for breeding hens!"

While in Tazewell County, George met, courted, and married Maria Boren. They were the parents of a daughter, Jane, and a son, Lex. Although George was very busy and devoted to his profession, his first priority was his family.

¹Acknowledgment is given to The Best from Litton, Livestock Breeder Journal Inc., Macon, GA. 1985.

²Corresponding author: cajunjoe@vt.edu

Received January 29, 2009.

Accepted April 17, 2009.

In 1940, Litton was appointed to the VPI animal husbandry faculty and worked in all 3 areas of teaching, research, and extension. In 1942 he was named extension sheep specialist and in 1952 was appointed head of the department of animal husbandry. When Professor Litton became head of the department in 1952, only 1 faculty member held a PhD degree. When he retired in 1970, 14 faculty members had PhD degrees. While he was department head, research and teaching programs in swine nutrition, ruminant nutrition, meat science, and reproductive physiology were added to the department. Litton also initiated an equine extension program.

Professor Litton was a great communicator and was very open with the faculty. Litton hired young faculty members and increased support to reward those who were most productive. The faculty members were very productive under his leadership, especially those he hired. The faculty members have had a major impact, nationally and internationally. Before Litton became department head, no faculty member of the department had received an American Society of Animal Science (ASAS) award. Of those Litton hired, 10 received ASAS awards.

Professor Litton played a major role in gaining approval for the new building that currently houses the Departments of Animal and Poultry Sciences, and Dairy Science. The building was named Litton-Reaves Hall in his honor and that of the late Professor Paul Reaves, an outstanding teacher of dairy science.

The extension programs developed under Litton's leadership have had major impacts. For example, while serving as department head, Professor Litton helped Virginia become the first state to establish beef cattle performance testing programs, which led to the formation of the Virginia Beef Cattle Association. Many other states have developed similar programs following the VPI model. Litton also provided leadership in starting ram and boar testing programs in Virginia.

Professor Litton also started Animal Industry Day in 1963, which became an annual industry event scheduled on the second Friday in July until 2001. The program consisted of a keynote speaker and reports on current research by VPI animal scientists. Two of the most outstanding keynote speakers were the late Orville Freeman, US secretary of agriculture, and the late Oliver Willham, former president of Oklahoma State University. Progress reports of research were published annually and were distributed at Animal Industry Day. This popular activity attracted livestock producers from throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia, with more than 2,000 producers in attendance in many years.

Professor Litton maintained excellent communications with the industry, including small and large livestock producers, feed and fertilizer suppliers, meat packers, and commodity groups. In return, industry personnel strongly supported the departmental programs. Litton was in high demand as a speaker to producer groups, industry personnel, and professional meetings. He was

a prolific writer in magazines, being most famous for his column called Litton's Logic in *Livestock Breeder Journal*. The best of these columns was published as a book in 1989, titled *The Best from Litton*.

George Litton had a real passion and love of livestock and made sure the department maintained outstanding flocks and herds of sheep, beef cattle, swine, and horses for teaching, research, and extension programs. Litton also had a strong interest in youth programs and was instrumental in the department developing one of the most successful 4-H livestock judging team programs in the country. Additionally, he made sure that students received real-world, hands-on experience in course laboratories at livestock centers, a practice that still remains important to this day.

Students were a priority for Professor Litton. Under his leadership, enrollment grew rapidly and graduates were in high demand by industry and at professional schools throughout the country. Litton emphasized development of the total student academically and professionally and was instrumental in establishing a nationally recognized Block and Bridle Club, as noted by the many awards over the years. He also emphasized the importance of advising and mentoring undergraduate and graduate students and was an advocate of developing long-term relationships with alumni. Graduates of the department have had major leadership roles in the state and nation. For example, graduates (undergraduate and graduate) have held positions such as director of extension, associate dean of agriculture, department head, secretary of the state beef cattle association, secretary of a major beef cattle breed association, and vice president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. Students and stakeholders were very important to Professor Litton, and he stressed their importance to the faculty and staff.

While he was department head, Litton also operated a beef cattle farm in an adjoining county. With his home-spun humor, Litton said the farm belonged to his wife, Maria, who hired him at \$1.00 per year. Litton had a manager for the farm and went to the farm normally only on Saturday afternoons and one day per year to haul the calves to the feeder calf sale.

In 1970, Litton retired to become director of the centennial program for the century celebration at VPI. Litton showed his leadership role in that position also. He scheduled several activities during the yearlong celebration. Among the activities were the annual meetings of the ASAS and the American Dairy Science Association.

After retiring Litton built a log cabin with logs from different parts of Virginia. The cabin was built in the Appalachian Mountains, about 10 miles from Blacksburg, next to Poverty Creek, which was stocked each spring with mountain trout. The logs, some of which were 200 years old, each displaying axe marks from hewing. The history of the origin of the logs included oak logs from his grandfather's barns in Lee County, poplar logs from Scott County, chestnut logs from Burkes Gar-

den (Tazewell County), and spruce logs from Pulaski. George loved to tell tales about what they might have experienced, including Indian raids, starvation, birth, sickness, health, sorrow, death, and happiness.

Litton stated that the first big event was moving into his cabin and, the next was the marriage of his daughter, Jane. Another important occasion was when ASAS met at VPI in 1972 and George and Maria served breakfast in the cabin to the officers and board of directors.

Professor Litton received numerous awards. Among the more important ones were

- Progressive Farmer's "Man of the Year in Agriculture" - 1961
- Wine Award Winner for Teaching at VPI - 1961
- Cattleman of the Year by Virginia Beef Cattle Association - 1966
- Kentucky Colonel - 1970
- Distinguished Service Award, Southern Section, ASAS - 1972
- Fellow, ASAS - 1973
- Member, Board of Directors, Warm Hearth Inc. - 1974
- Distinguished Alumnus of VPI by Alumni Association - 1979
- Saddle and Sirloin Hall of Fame - Portrait presented at North American Livestock International, Louisville, KY - 1980.

Some of these awards were national and international recognition, such as the Saddle and Sirloin Hall of Fame Portrait. Only a limited number of animal scientists have been recognized with this award.

Litton was involved in many church, civic, and community activities. One of his most important activities was establishment of Warm Hearth Village, an upscale community for retirees in Blacksburg. Litton and the late Wybe Kroontje, retired professor of agronomy, initiated that project. Warm Hearth Village is a nonprofit organization, including independent and assisted living with meals provided for residents who cannot or prefer not to cook. Litton and his wife Maria moved in one of the life-lease apartments in 1983, where he continued to cultivate a garden. Litton was recognized in many ways for his leadership, including the naming of a street, Litton Lane, in the village.

In summary, Professor George Litton was a great stockman, teacher, communicator, administrator, and friend to the many faculty, staff, students, alumni, and industry clientele he served over the years. To those who had the good fortune to work with and know him, Litton was a true role model for his many contributions to the livestock industry, academia, and the animal science profession.