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June 2023 • tnmagazine.org

THE TENNESSEE MAGAZINE

**Family Heirlooms Made by
Lynnville's Colonel Littleton**

**Tennessee History for Kids
The Notorious Ned Buntline**

**State Park Spotlight
Lamar Alexander
Rocky Fork State Park**

**Poet's Playground
Contest Winners**

Brisket Brilliance



CONTENTS

FEATURES

10 Colonel Littleton's Handmade Heirlooms-To-Be

Lynnville's own Colonel Littleton, with the help of 40 craftsmen and employees, makes leather goods to die for — and then pass on to the next generation. *by Robin Conover*

18 Best of Tennessee 2023

Nominate your favorites across the state.

28 Tennessee's Poets Write On

Our eloquent neighbors of all ages submit their prose and profound observations.

30 Lamar Alexander Rocky Fork State Park

This lush and lovely state park has much to offer nature-loving visitors. *by Trish Milburn*

33 Fair Thee Well

June marks the return of fair season in Tennessee.

PERSPECTIVES

4 Between the Lines

Local leadership lets you know what's happening at the co-op.

6 Tennessee Today

The latest from a statewide perspective. *by Mike Knotts*

42 Point of View

Peer through the viewfinder with an award-winning photographer. *by Robin Conover*

DEPARTMENTS

8 Tennessee Almanac

Stay up-to-date with quick tips and news nuggets.

14 Tennessee History for Kids

Ned Buntline was a controversial figure. Read of his infamous link to Tennessee. *by Bill Carey*

20 Co-op News

Information from your electric cooperative or electric membership corporation.

26 Home Energy Q&A

Remember these efficiency tips when installing and maintaining well pumps in your home. *by Miranda Boutelle*

34 A Taste of Tennessee

Beautiful brisket is on the menu this month.

38 Tennessee Events

What's happening across the state this month and beyond.

40 Community Corner

Check out Artist's Palette, and see our Find the Flag winners.

ABOUT THE COVER

Colonel Littleton stands in his warm, eclectic shop in Lynnville among his own designs: handbags, purses, notebooks and other products handcrafted by leatherwork masters. Read of the history of this internationally renowned, one-of-a-kind brand on page 10. Photograph by Robin Conover

THIS PAGE

The sun sets on the Defeated Creek campground looking over Cordell Hull Lake near Carthage. Photograph by Robin Conover

Lynnville's COLONEL LITTLETON

FAMILY HEIRLOOMS IN THE MAKING

Story and Photographs by Robin Conover

Stepping into the Col. Littleton retail store in Lynnville feels like stepping back in time. Just an hour or so south of Nashville, where Highway 129 crosses the tracks by the railroad museum, you will find a strip of downtown businesses along Mill Street.

The large glass storefronts, circa 1860s, have seen their share of businesses come and go through the years. Once at the center of a bustling farming community, these downtown businesses provided residents with the staples of rural farm life — fabric, hard candy, flour and sugar as well as necessary hardware, tools and feed.

Today, Lynnville's downtown merchants rely on tourists as well as locals for business success. Three of the most popular tourist stops have become the Soda Pop Junction for a real homemade meal, Lynnville Railroad Museum for some local history and Col. Littleton for family heirlooms.

As one of Lynnville's largest employers, Littleton now owns several of these storefronts and a manufacturing facility near downtown to house his thriving business. In a small town with a population of about 400, you might not expect to find the fashionable, high-end leather products that fill the large window displays on either side of the front door.

Inside, the collection of antiques and memorabilia that supplement the beautiful displays of leather goods catch the eye of many a window-shopping passerby. The smell of leather permeates the store — as does the warmth of the friendly greeting each customer receives from the proprietors.

Colonel Littleton, a Duck River Electric Membership Corporation member whose given name is Garry Allen Littleton, designs every item the company sells — leather belts, wallets, purses, travel bags, briefcases and portfolios, to name just a few of the items produced.

"This all started out in 1987 with 17 pairs of antique cuff links," says Colonel Littleton. "I was on the road, traveling throughout the country in the men's apparel industry. I had purchased these antique cuff links, thinking some of the store owners I called on might like them. The next week, the first store I visited in Birmingham bought all 17 pairs. I thought, well, that's not bad, you know. So I started adding more items like that."

After calling on upscale men's apparel stores for years, the Colonel had a nagging thought in the back of his head.

"One day I got to thinking that there weren't going to be any more family heirlooms. Laptops and cellphones aren't going to be family heirlooms, you know. I thought if there's no more pocket knives or fountain pens or

Below, the main retail location for Col. Littleton in downtown Lynnville draws customers from across the country looking for unique, handmade heirlooms. The trademark designs of the Colonel include, below left, journals, Bible covers and portfolios, and below right, the Gentlemen's No. 3 Leather Grip Bag and Ladies' Hunt Bag.



COL.
Littleton®

THE GREAT AMERICAN LEATHER COMPANY

WE'RE OPEN
COME IN
9:30 AM
(10)

PLEASE
NO FOOD OR DRINK
IN STORE
NO RESTROOM
AVAILABLE

Secured by
ADT



Clockwise from upper left, Colonel Littleton works on a new template at his drafting table in the manufacturing facility; Richard Woodard and the Colonel inspect a buffalo hide; Keo Inthavong sews together a leather portfolio; and Kelsey Watts assembles a briefcase before it goes to the stitching department.

pearl-handled pistols — what will you have to pass on?” Littleton said. “I thought everybody needed a pocket knife, so I designed some and was selling them to a few stores. Then we started engraving names on the handle, and we really started selling them.”

Those pocket knives have been a staple in Col. Littleton’s line until this year. “This year, we phased them out. But I always say if you had your Granddaddy’s pocket knife with his name engraved on it, what would you take for it? Probably 98% of all items we sell are monogrammed.”

Beginning about 35 years ago, the Colonel and his wife, Susie, began to see a path for their accessories business leading both to leave their full-time occupations to concentrate on their growing business.

entire country.

Customers notably include a number of past U.S. presidents such as George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, governors such as Bill Lee and a host of celebrities. Numerous corporations ranging from Fortune 500 companies to medium and small companies use Col. Littleton products for their corporate gifting programs, and countless CEOs carry Littleton’s most popular products — leather portfolios or briefcases.

Today, the Colonel’s product line includes 175 meticulously handmade leather items ranging in price from about \$30 to several thousands of dollars. Littleton hopes customers will treasure their purchases for years before eventually passing them on as family heirlooms to the next generation.



Above left, Kandice Prince assembles a travel bag with hardware. Col. Littleton remains one of the largest employers of skilled craftspeople in Lynnville. Above right is the Bentley Tote with American buffalo and American alligator accents. Below, Colonel Littleton stands near the 1927 Baldwin steam locomotive that is a centerpiece of the downtown Lynnville Railroad Museum.

With all the products made in the U.S., each piece begins as a design created by the Colonel. Some of the first leather products included cell phone holsters, mouse pads and wallets.

American buffalo, steer and alligator hides are chosen carefully and inspected before being cut by hand using custom metal templates as guides. Each item moves through the assembly process as part of a small batch from one workstation to the next until completion with a final inspection.

Touring the facility, you can't help but notice some of the Colonel's words of wisdom and quotes to live by printed on various signs and posters, including this one:

"A good philosophy for life and business: Do more than you get paid for. Give people more than they expect. Go the extra mile. Strive to be Stellar. — Colonel"

Each of Littleton's employees seems to take this motto to heart as they strive to precisely complete each step in the process and with attention to every detail.

"I promote small town America. I think everybody wants to believe there's a Mayberry somewhere... that

life is not as crazy as it is in downtown Nashville or in a high rise in Chicago or New York," says Littleton. "They want to think maybe somewhere life's a little simpler. Our products come from small town America, and I believe people can associate with that a little bit. It's a connection to something a little bit different ... maybe to a different place in time."

Colonel Littleton's successful formula combines small town America, products sourced and handmade in the U.S. and customer service that makes you feel like you are in Mayberry. It's safe to say the company will be making family heirlooms that will be enjoyed for many generations to come. ■

For more information about Col. Littleton, please stop by the Lynnville store or contact via:

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or 931-527-0593 (retail store)

Email: CustomerService@ColonelLittleton.com

Address: 113 Mill St., Lynnville, TN 38472

Website: colonellittleton.com

