

Billionaire Texas Oilman

By Martin Weil

Washington Post Staff Writer

H. L. Hunt, 85, the Texas oilman and promoter of a conservative political philosophy, whose fortune, estimated in the billions of dollars, made him one of the world's richest men, died yesterday in a Dallas hospital.

A spokesman for Baylor Medical Center, where he was admitted Sept. 14 with what was described as a virus, said the cause of death would not be disclosed immediately.

A shrewd, thrifty, fifth-grade dropout who was said to be worth as much as \$5 billion but nevertheless carried his lunch to work in a brown paper bag, Mr. Hunt often appeared more concerned with making money than with spending it.

A self-made man who feared the Communist menace and said in 1967 that "we have perhaps three, four, five years to save the republic," he devoted much of his time and much of the money that he did spend to efforts to spread his conservative views. He called them "freedom education."

A main vehicle for his message has been Life Line, a daily taped radio commentary on public affairs that began in 1958 and was heard at its peak in 1971 on 531 stations.

Others have included a newspaper column that he wrote, mostly for weekly papers in the South and Southwest and Facts Forum, a predecessor to Life Line, on which he spent a reported \$3.5 million and which produced and distributed radio and television programs from 1951 to 1956.

Critics were quick to tag the philosophy promoted through these channels as conservative or ultraconservative, but Mr. Hunt rejected the labels, preferring to call his philosophy "constructivism."

"You can never be accused of being too constructive," he said.

Although he was perhaps

H. L. Hunt Dies

the most successful of the Texas oil wildcatters, a fabulous breed of men whose rags-to-unbelievable- riches life stories and lavish lifestyles seized and held the American imagination, Mr. Hunt remained almost unknown to the public at large until about 25 years ago.

In fact, he was said to have been almost a recluse until 1948 when Life magazine published a fuzzy photograph of him standing on a Dallas street corner, and announced he was the richest man in the nation.

That prompted him to give his first interview, at the age of 59, to a reporter for the Dallas Morning News, and other interviews followed in which Mr. Hunt

proved to be eminently quotable on topics of considerable interest—such as money.

"Money as money is nothing," he said. "It is just something to make book-keeping convenient."

Efforts to estimate the size of his fortune were unceasing. Seven years ago it was said that he made as much as \$1 million a week.

Although he did not discuss his net worth in any detail, it was noted that he did not go out of his way to deny reports that his resources ranged as high as \$5 billion.

"Just unimaginable," a former aide said yesterday when asked to specify the size of the fortune. "Into the billions."

One clue often cited was a statement Mr. Hunt made to an interviewer in 1963. "During the war (World War II)," he said, he and his family alone "produced more oil than Germany produced or had access to, including Romania . . ."

For all his riches, Mr. Hunt had a lifestyle that could reasonably be described as austere. Possessing no yachts or private airplanes, maintaining only two homes, sometimes trimming his own hair, he did little to belie the statement he once made: "I don't spend much money. There's nothing I want but what I'd buy. But I have no inclination to throw money away."

Until recent years, when



At left, Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy gets a MacArthur for President button from H. L. Hunt. At right, Hunt has lunch in his office.

Photos by Dallas Morning News and UPI

his health no longer permitted it, he drove himself to work, in a medium sized auto, which he left several blocks from his downtown Dallas skyscraper office to avoid a modest parking fee.

Inside the office, interviewers saw him amid cracked leather furniture and undraped walls as the six-footer shuffled over a threadbare rug, expressing his fears about America's future.

The lunch that came out of his well-known paper bag included such items as an apple, brown bread, cheese, raisins and orange drink.

He was—or at any rate, had become—a health food enthusiast. "White sugar is the No. 1 poison," he told a reporter once. "White flour the No. 2 poison and saturated fats the No. 3 poison."

For all of what might to some have seemed Mr. Hunt's eccentricities, those who met him had little difficulty in discerning the powers that enabled him to amass his fortune.

They saw shrewdness beneath the heavy lids of his blue-green eyes. They found a Southern charm that could quickly shift to steely sharpness.

Encountered in his 70s, a white-haired man in store-bought suits, with soft hands, a generally gentle manner and signs of a paunch, he showed nevertheless a realistic outlook

and an encyclopedic memory as well as the restless energy and gambling instincts that brought him wealth and let him to insist, despite the criticisms of those who opposed his philosophy—"I don't have a conservative hair in my head."

Haroldson Lafayette Hunt was born Feb. 17, 1889, on his family's farm in Vandalia, Ill. He was one of eight children born to a former Confederate soldier and the daughter of a Union Army chaplain.

Although he learned to read at the age of 3, farm work interfered with his formal education and he reached only the fifth grade in school.

In later years he proposed a model for a new constitution in a book, "Alpaca," and planned to follow it with another, "Yourtopia," which he said would have an even better constitution, granting additional voting power to those with high scholastic ranking, but not for formal education. Mr. Hunt himself would have benefited, because although he dropped out of school, he ranked second on an eighth grade equivalency exam.

At the age of 16, Mr. Hunt left home, traveling across the Western states, working as a farmhand, cowboy, lumberjack and mule skinner.

Coming into a \$6,000 inheritance on the death of his father in 1911, he bought

a cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta, near Lake Village, Ark. Later he speculated in cotton and timber land in Louisiana.

Mr. Hunt owned 15,000 acres of land in Arkansas and Louisiana by the time cotton prices collapsed, taking with them the value of his holdings.

At the time of the collapse of cotton, there were rumors of an oil strike in an Arkansas town with the prophetic name of El Dorado.

Rather than sell his land, which he believed would ultimately rise again in value, Mr. Hunt borrowed \$50 and went to El Dorado.

"I began trading in oil land..." he told an interviewer.

"Yes, but how did you do that without money?"

"Well, when you have no cash," Mr. Hunt replied, "you have to rely on other things. Like conversation."

He said he would offer a farmer perhaps \$25 an acre for an oil lease; then drive back to town and find someone willing to pay \$35 an acre for a lease on the same land.

This sort of simultaneous buying and selling gave Mr. Hunt his start in oil. After six months he was able to lease half an acre of his own.

By the end of 1923 he had 44 producing wells in the El Dorado area and the next year he sold a half interest in 40 of them for \$600,000.

Through the middle and late 1920s, Mr. Hunt continued to expand his operations in the southwest. In 1930 came what has been described as his greatest coup, the foundation of his fortune.

In September of that year a wildcatter named C. M. (Dad) Joiner found a vast pool of oil on 4,000 acres he owned in Rusk County in east Texas. But without any money and too deeply in debt to borrow any, Joiner could not drill.

Nor, it turned out, could he sell. The big companies, it is said, were not interested because they feared

Joiner's titles were not in good order. Most independents had been hard hit by the 1929 Wall Street crash.

In stepped Mr. Hunt. In return it is said, for \$30,000 in cash, three short-term notes of \$15,000 each and an agreement to turn back \$1.2 million worth of oil should any be produced, he took control of the site of what was then the richest pool of oil discovered in the world.

He did not stop prospecting, buying, leasing, drilling. At times he was drilling up to 25 wells at once. Although he was not a geologist, he had his own ideas.

"I go on the theory that if you hit oil at one place, you are likely to find it again in the same neighborhood," he said.

His principal oil corporation, the Hunt Oil Co., was founded in 1936. Its headquarters are in Dallas. His children, as a group, own the Placid Oil Corp., the Hunt Petroleum Corp. and the Hunt International Petroleum Corp.

In addition to vast oil and natural gas interests, Mr. Hunt had large real estate holdings, which included the ranch at Cody, Wyo., where he had thousands of head of cattle and sheep, and maintained his second home.

(His principal residence, near Dallas, was a model of Mount Vernon, several times larger than the original.)

At one time he was said to be the world's largest grower of papershell pecans, with groves in four states, and on the broad front lawn of his Dallas home as well.

"You have to be lucky," he once said about making money. "You have to be of an acquisitive nature, aggressive and thrifty. You

have to be honest and fair or at least have people think you are. You can't do a great volume of business unless your word is accepted."

"I've never tried to become the biggest oil man or anything else," he went on "I simply like to do things—oil, cattle, real estate, timber, whatever — on as big a scale as he can . . ."

And in a separate interview in 1964, Mr. Hunt tied his fortune to his political activities: "Nothing I have amounts to anything for me or my children or their children if we are going the way of Cuba."

He was principally concerned about staving off what he saw as the menace of communism, socialism, collectivism.

He once said that "Calvin Coolidge turned in the last successful administration" in Washington. "There was no subversive build-up whatever in Washington during Coolidge's term," he said.

Although he was a registered Democrat, he was known as a supporter of the late Joseph R. McCarthy (R-Wis.) and he hoped to see the Republican presidential nomination in 1952 go to Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

He supported Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic nomination in 1960, asserting at the time that Johnson might be the "strong man" needed to stop communism. Although he backed the Democratic ticket headed by John F. Kennedy in 1960, his support in 1964 went to Barry M. Goldwater, who was viewed as far closer than the Democrats to his political philosophy.

In a 1963 interview, Mr. Hunt spurned ideas of retirement. "There is no stopping place," he said. "I couldn't live in retirement. I don't want to hunt or play golf. I just want to do what I'm doing. I have a good time doing it."

"... There are times when I've wished I'd wake up stone broke. It would be a great adventure—to see how good I was, to see if I could create lots of wealth again."

His first wife, Lyda died in 1955 after 41 years of marriage. They had six children, H. L. Jr., Margaret, Caroline, Nelson, Herbert and Lamar. Lamar is owner of the Kansas City Chiefs.

In 1957 Mr. Hunt married Ruth Ray Wright, who had four children by a previous marriage.