

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

Romantic Story of
White “Weed” Discovery:
Why Kentucky Excels in the Production of
White Burley Tobacco

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Why Kentucky Excels in the Production of White Burley Tobacco

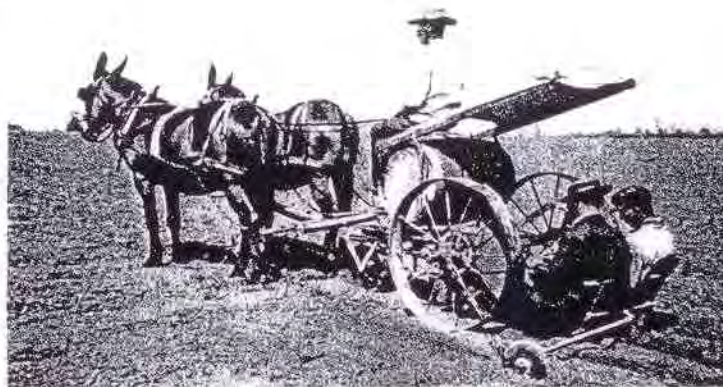
By E. J. KINNEY, State Experiment Station

SIXTY-FIVE years ago Mr. George Webb, a farmer living in Brown County, Ohio, just across the river from Bracken County, Kentucky, discovered the variety of tobacco known as White Burley. It would be difficult to name an event which has proved of more importance to the Bluegrass region of Kentucky than Mr. Webb's discovery. Unquestionably, the great cash returns from the tobacco crop each year are responsible to no small extent for the prosperity of this part of the State, both agricultural and urban, and it was the excellence of White Burley leaf grown on the rich soils of the region that permitted the development of such a profitable industry. Surely Central Kentucky has cause to be grateful to Mr. Webb—a gratitude which might fittingly be expressed by the erection of a monument to his memory.

The story of how White Burley was discovered has been told many times, but an interesting story is well worth repeating. Prior to the discovery of the White Burley variety, tobacco was an important crop in only a few of the most northern counties of the Bluegrass region. It was also grown in a few counties in southern Ohio. The Virginia—a dark variety of tobacco—was used, the growing plant of which was characterized by the dark green color of the stalks and leaves, and the cured leaf by a heavy body and a reddish to dark brown color. In appearance

and quality, the leaf was practically identical with the dark-air-cured tobacco grown then and at the present time in northern Virginia and western Kentucky, and with which it competed in the market. This type of tobacco furnished the larger part of the leaf used for the manufacture of smoking and chewing tobacco for the domestic trade. Apparently, the crop was not sufficiently profitable to encourage any extension of the producing area to adjoining territory.

Mr. Webb, as has been stated, lived in Brown County, Ohio, near a little village called Higginsport. He failed to save seed the previous year, so in the spring of 1864 he rowed across the river and obtained a supply from a Mr. Barkley in Bracken County, Kentucky, who probably was known as a producer of fine quality leaf. This seed was of a strain called Little Burley—apparently a well known dark sort in that locality. The seed was sown and, after the



Everybody sitting. But still transplanting tobacco isn't exactly a popular job.

plants in the bed had attained considerable size, Mr. Webb noticed that a number were of a pale green color distinctly different from the dark green color of the other plants in the bed. Thinking them diseased, Mr. Webb pulled these plants out and threw them away. Fortunately, not all the seed obtained from Mr. Barkley was sown that year, and another bed was planted the following spring with the remainder. Again the peculiar-looking plants appeared.

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White Burley tobacco breeders and seed growers sack the seed heads to prevent cross pollination.

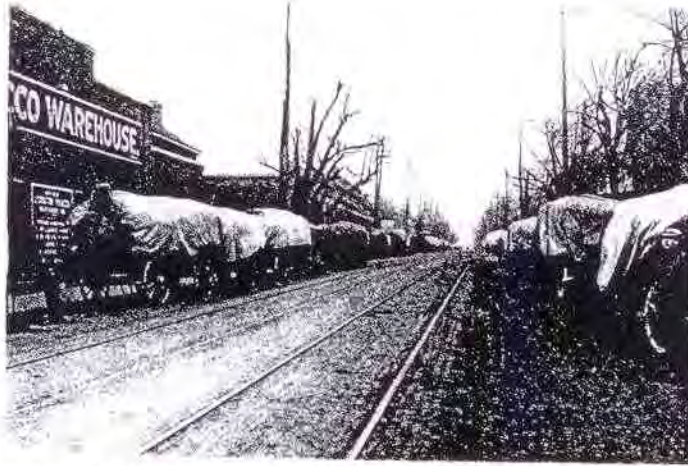
White Weed

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This time Mr. Webb's curiosity was aroused, and the plants were saved and later transplanted. They grew just as well as the other plants and, as they matured, the pale color of the leaves became more pronounced, making a very striking contrast with the dark green leaves of the parent variety of tobacco. This tobacco attracted much attention, and sufficient seed was saved to plant several acres the following year. The name White Burley, later adopted, indicates its light color and its parentage—Little Burley.

At first, this new tobacco did not meet a ready sale and it was used chiefly for making fine-cut and twist chewing tobacco. Eventually, manufacturers were induced to try it for making plug, and it proved so satisfactory to both the manufacturers and consumers of plug tobacco that the demand quickly exceeded the supply. Attractive prices were offered, which resulted in a great expansion of the producing area.

The soils of that part of Brown County, Ohio, where White Burley was first grown, are below the glaciated area and are like the soils of the Bluegrass region of Kentucky. They are derived from the Cincinnati and Trenton limestones, which have produced soils with rapid drainage and good aeration—warm, "quick" soils in which plants grow rapidly. It was soon learned that this type of soil was necessary to produce White Burley leaf that possessed the qualities that make it so popular—namely, light body, bright color, mild flavor, and a high absorptive capacity for sweetening and flavoring liquids. Such soils were not to be found toward the north, and it was only natural, therefore, that the expansion in production called for by the rapidly increasing demands should occur in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky, with its great area of adapted soils. It was not many years until the growing of White Burley tobacco has become an important industry in practically every county of this region.

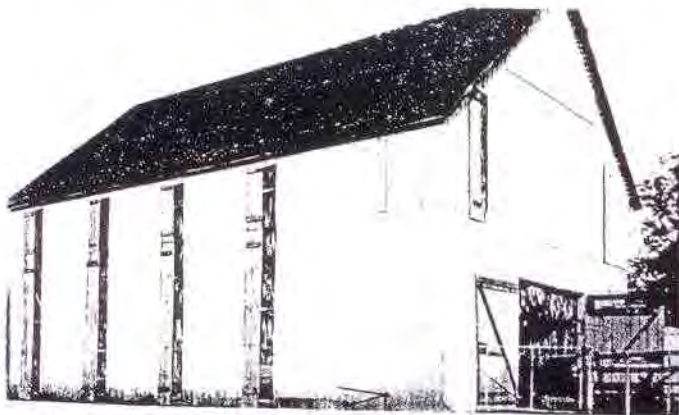


Waiting To Unload During The Market Season—This photograph was taken back in the days when most of the tobacco was hauled by wagon rather than truck.

White Burley leaf was for many years regarded as chiefly valuable for making plug tobacco. Then it was found that it made an excellent smoking tobacco, and soon brands of smoking tobacco made from Burley became so popular that there was little demand for other kinds. Its use for smoking practically doubled consumption and permitted a large increase in production. In recent years it has become an important cigarette tobacco, and its use for this purpose bids fair to increase rapidly in the future. In fact, as one

prominent tobacco manufacturer remarked, every tobacco product made from White Burley meets with approval by the consuming public. The popularity of White Burley tobacco is clearly shown by the fact that manufacturers use more than 275,000,000 pounds each year in making tobacco products for domestic consumption. At the present time, little is exported, but growers anticipate that in future years its excellent qualities will be recognized by foreign countries with a resulting profitable export trade.

An interesting and important feature of the White Burley market in recent years is the strong demand for the finest quality of leaf, particularly the smooth, colory grades. The proportion of the crop used for smoking tobacco and cigarettes has increased each year, and in the manufacture of these products large amounts of thin, colory leaf must be used to give good burning qualities, mild flavor, and attractive color. Such leaf commands excellent prices even when the average price is low. The profitableness of a crop of White Burley depends largely, therefore, upon the grower's ability to produce a large proportion of the finer grades of leaf. The increasing demand for thin leaf is a fortunate situation for the growers of White Burley in the established Burley district. There is no large area outside of this district with soils that can produce, year after year, a quality of leaf that will meet the discriminating demands of the manufacturers at the present time. Even in the other limited areas suitable to Burley, lack of experience in handling crops is a handicap.



The tobacco is housed and the hardest work in raising the crop is over.



When White Burley grows "big."