

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

The Origin of White Burley Tobacco

Author and date unknown

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THE ORIGIN OF WHITE BURLEY TOBACCO

As early as the year 1850 tobacco ranked as the most important crop in Brown County, Ohio.

In the early days, the varieties grown were Stand-Up Burley, Little Burley, Yellow Burley and Twist Bud. But in the year 1864 a new variety made its appearance which soon usurped the place of all the older varieties, and no one to this day knows exactly its origin for like Topsy, it simply "grewed" in a tobacco bed on the Samuel Ellis Sr. farm on Big Run near Higginsport, Ohio.

The tobacco seed, Little Burley, had been obtained from George Barkley, who lived in Kentucky, just across the Ohio River from Higginsport. It was sown by George Webb, a tenant on the Ellis farm.

As soon as the plants were of any size, Webb noticed a few of a peculiar creamy, almost milk-white color; to these he called the attention of William Lyon and other neighbors, who all advised destroying them as they appeared to be diseased. So in weeding his tobacco bed, he destroyed, as he thought, all the white plants. A few however, escaped and were transplanted with the green plants to the tobacco field. Later, when he discovered them growing so sturdily and looking so peculiar among their dark hued relatives, he decided to let them live merely as a matter of curiosity, but to prevent seeding he topped every plant.

His crop ripened, was harvested and housed, and the strange looking plants were apparently forgotten, until he noticed now and then, when stripping his tobacco, a stalk of deep cream, or almost golden color. He realized at once that this beautifully colored tobacco was from the little white plants he had tired so industriously to exterminate, and the more he thought of these golden hands, the more

he regretted destroying all the seed. However the following Spring when lookin up his seed, he was surprised and much pleased to find a small quantity of the Barkley seed left over from the year before.

This he sowed with seed of Little Burley and as in the previous year, the little white plants appeared, but instead of destroying them this time in 1865 he transplanted them to the field as they came with the green plants. After finishing his transplanting, he gave the remainder of the bed of plants to two neighbors, (Joseph Foor and Shaffer Boles,) who each set out small patches of all white plants.

As the white tobacco began to develop the leaves became a whitish green, and the fibers, stems and main stalk almost a milk white. The contrast between the white tobacco and dark green of the Little Burley was quite remarkable. Not only that, but another sport was found which grew very tall, course and rank, its narrow leaves being a very dark green thus added to the peculiar appearance of the tobacco patches. This was called Black Tobacco, and was soon entirely exterminated.

All through the summer of 1865, the neighbors watched vigorous growth of the new tobacco with ever increasing interest. But it was not until the small white patches began to ripen, looking like a cloth of gold dropped along the hillside in vivid contrast to the bright green of the Little Burley, that the news spread to the outside world that new variety of tobacco had been discovered.

Then it was that Big Run back in the Ohio River hills became, in a sense, a Mecca to the tobacco planters for miles around, for until the tobacco was cut and housed, the hills echoed daily the ring of hoof beats as curious and skeptical riders made pilgrimage up the old rough and rocky Run Road to find out for themselves the truth about the much talked of new variety of tobacco. Naturally many comments,

pro and con, were heard on all sides. Some feared it would be too light in weight to be profitable, others feared the flavor would be too bitter for manufacturing, all agreeing, however, that nothing like it in color had ever been seen, and all eagerly awaited its curing and the opinions of the tobacco buyers.

When the three farmers delivered their tobacco to the Higginsport Ohio market that year, several hundred pounds of the golden tobacco was found in their crops. On examination by experts judges, it was voted a "find" of marvelous color, satiny texture, and possessing all the qualities favorable to manufacturing. Though lighter in weight than the parent variety, it made up in quality what it lacked in quantity.

This verdict from expert tobacco judges made a veritable gold rush for seed, and the three farmers, Webb, Boles and Foor, who had saved large quantities of seed, gave generously to all who asked.

From this seed 20,000 pounds of White Burley tobacco was grown the next year. Two hogsheads of which were prized at Higginsport, and shipped to Cincinnati where it out sold all other tobacco on the Cincinnati Market. These two hogsheads were then exhibited at the St. Louis Tobacco Fair where, after being awarded first and second premiums, it sold for fifty eight cents per pound.

The remainder of this crop was bought and sold at a high figure by the firm of which Amos Ellis of Higginsport, Ohio was a member. It was at this time, 1867, that Mr. Ellis named the new Tobacco, White Burley.

These awards and high prices gave great impetus to its culture and it soon took the place of all the older varieties.

In almost eighty nine years since its discovery, the plants have lost the milky whiteness of stalk and stem, reverting more to the color of the parent variety, while the cured leaf is deeper golden brown than

it was originally. But it is still far superior to any of the older varieties.

Thus from a few tiny seeds and a mistake of nature, (or was it a mistake) a gigantic industry grew.