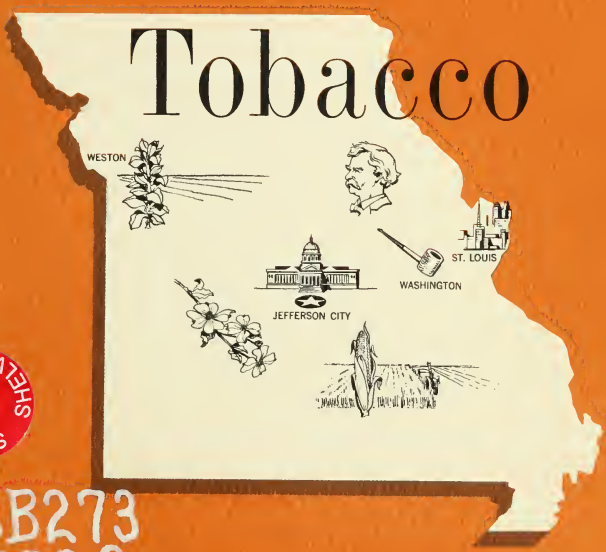
Missouri & Tobacco



A Chapter in America's Industrial Growth

This booklet tells something of Missouri's place in the tobacco economy of America. In 1959 tobacco products were sold at retail in the state for more than $100 million. Missouri is the "corncob capital" of the world. Thousands of its farms produce cash crops of tobacco. The revenue from the tax placed on cigarettes has been a source of community benefits to Missouri. And tobacco has provided some unusual material for the lore of the state.

Tobacco History Series

THE TOBACCO INSTITUTE, INC.
910 17th Street, N.W., Washington, D. C.

1960

Missouri and Tobacco

In the development of the tobacco industry to its present-day proportions Missouri had an important share. Some phases of its participation in the national tobacco commerce were, indeed, unique.

Not only was Missouri a producer of desirable leaf but St. Louis became for a while the center of tobacco manufacture in the United States. Missouri's ingenious backwoodsmen evolved a product which was long the dominant form of tobacco used in America and thus brought a new phrase into the English language: "plug tobacco."

Its farmers created a novel pipe — the corncob — an article which found its way around the globe. A petite and pretty citizen of St. Louis became the first lady cigarette drummer and made headlines in her time. The most famous smoker of his day—a world citizen—was a Missourian. No one writing on the development of the tobacco industry in America can ignore Missouri's contributions.

Today, together with some 60 million fellow Americans, most people of Missouri have a high regard for tobacco. The extent of their interest in one of the most

widespread of social habits has been recorded for various periods. In the year ending June 30, 1959, for instance, Missourians purchased over 550 million packages of cigarettes.

This reported segment of retail sales is, obviously, but a small part of the broad, complex pattern of the tobacco industry's activities in the United States.

Annually, for the past few years, tobacco manufacturers have paid a billion dollars and more to tobacco farmers in America for the world's finest leaf. Tobacco products sold in the retail markets of the United States for nearly $6.8 billion in 1959. And these sales brought some $2.7 billion to federal, state and municipal treasuries.

The business of producing and manufacturing tobacco; promoting, distributing and merchandising the finished commodity weaves throughout the intricate pattern of America's economy. Many major and a great number of minor industries participate in various phases of the national tobacco trade.

Missouri's contributions range from leaf to cigarette machines

Missouri shares in almost all of the activities of the tobacco industry. Its farmers grow fine Burley tobacco, an essential ingredient in cigarettes, smoking and chewing tobaccos and some snuffs. Its factories produce many million cigars and nearly 13½ million pounds of smoking and chewing tobacco. It has over 37,000 retail outlets which dispense tobacco products. In 1958 these had a

wholesale value of $100 million. Important to the total picture in the state is the production of automatic merchandising devices. St. Louis now leads the country in the manufacture of cigarette-vending machines.

The direct state tax on cigarettes alone, between 1956 when the levy was established and June 30, 1959, has brought more than $35 million to Missouri's treasury. Additional to income from this source is the yield from the current sales tax applied to cigarettes sold at retail.

The consumer demand for tobacco gives employment to many people in Missouri. Among them are the farmers and helpers on more than 4,000 farms whose tobacco produce brought growers about $2,250,000 in 1958. A census of that part of Missouri's working population whose income in whole or in part derives from the tobacco trade would make an impressive total.

That the trade is not entirely intrastate is shown by the most recent figure for goods shipped out: $11,843,218. The value of raw materials (some of which are of local origin) required by tobacco manufacturers of the state totaled about $7,400,000. Part of the cost of conducting this business came to $1,348,208 for rent, taxes and insurance. Production workers and other employees earned $1,840,000 in wages, salaries and commissions.

The facts and figures briefly reported give some indication of the economic value of tobacco to Missouri. Its fiscal value has taken visible form in new roads, new schools and other constructions important to the general community. For many years Missouri has been a considerable taxpayer on manufactured tobacco products. In the decade from 1872, for instance, its yield to the federal treasury totaled over $18 million. (This was in a

period when a major concentration of tobacco factories was taking place in St. Louis.) That yield was but a small part of the state's contribution to the Treasury Department since the tobacco excise was established in 1862.

Missourians never had prohibitory laws against tobacco. While concerted attacks were being made against the cigarette, notably in the 1890's and early 1920's, state legislators realized that cigarette smoking could not be legislated out of existence or smokers frightened into abstinence. The experience of sister states with prohibitory or restrictive laws against the cigarette had proved this. All such legislation, some of it of brief existence, turned out to be a futile invasion of privacy. Cigarette users gave convincing evidence that their right to smoke was not one which free people are willing to relinquish.

Leaf grown by early settlers sells in New York

The modern story of tobacco in Missouri goes back to the first white settlers in the territory, French-Canadians from villages across the Mississippi. They were chiefly snuff-takers, though there were some pipe smokers among them. Not for them the rank, tough tobacco native to the area. For a while they obtained twist, and roll tobacco called "carottes," from the scenes of their emigration. Soon they were growing their own leaf and curing it.

Before the Louisiana Purchase there were many thousand American log-cabin pioneers in Missouri territory. After 1804 more Americans began to drift to the rich, fertile land, many coming from the crowded eastern sea-

board. There were good farmers among them and they improved the methods of limited tobacco cultivation in the area, bringing in seeds of the excellent type growing in Kentucky and Tennessee. The plant was grown and cured only for personal use until about 1820 when it began to be commercially cultivated on a small scale in what is now Howard County.

The culture spread to other areas. Emigrants from Virginia planted tobacco in Pike County in 1822. In 1824 the *St. Louis Enquirer* reported that "38 hogsheads of Missouri tobacco were sold in New York City at the highest price, being pronounced superior to any other description of tobacco in the market!"—an item which also appeared in the *Missouri Intelligencer*. Similar reports were coming in from the markets at New Orleans, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Within a decade tobacco had become the staple crop in Charlton County.

Explorers sooth redskins with tobacco

Some years before this, when Missouri was still called Louisiana, St. Louis was the starting point for expeditions to the greater areas of the West and Northwest. Lewis and Clark made their winter headquarters near that settlement in 1804 before beginning their memorable exploration.

In their essential stores they carried tobacco in twist and in cured leaf. On the road back Clark's men ran out of the valuable supply. Chewers among them were reduced to the bitter "bark of wild crab"; smokers to "the inner bark of the red willow." The victims of scarcity could hardly wait to reach the places where tobacco had

been cached for use on the return trip.

The stores of tobacco proved to be of even greater value than the satisfaction of personal needs. It was the most important single article in barter with the Indians. And hostile natives, on mischief bent, could always be placated by a present of the most coveted of white man's gifts. Those were the days when a leaf of tobacco painted red sent by messenger from an Indian chief was a warning of immediate war. But a portion of good, cured Missouri leaf placed in the hands of a belligerent Indian meant peace. It was not the first time that tobacco had served to further friendship and soothe the tempers of angry men.

Spaniards in the territory, in the 18th century, were chiefly cigar smokers. Cigars were coming into Louisiana from Havana and later were being manufactured at New Orleans. For snuffers and pipe smokers a fine new sort of tobacco became available after the 1830's, the Perique of Louisiana.

Plug comes out of a log

The equipment required for both snuff and pipes was, however, too burdensome to frontiersmen and pioneers from other states. Tobacco pressed into small slabs could be much more conveniently carried. As a practical matter, therefore, these early Missourians turned to "eating tobacco," the comforting chew.

Those were the days when a man could stand in his front yard and spit twenty feet without trespassing on his neighbors. As chewing tobacco grew in popularity

local users concocted a distinctively American method for giving the chew a special flavor. This homemade process may possibly have been known a little earlier in Kentucky but settlers from there perfected the method in a Missouri setting.

A portion of tobacco leaves, treated with wild honey and homemade peach or apple brandy, was wedged with a mallet into a hole bored in a log of green maple or hickory. The hole was then plugged. In a little while both log and tobacco had become properly dry. When the log was split, the leaves had been cured to a desirable flavor. This special sort of chewing tobacco promptly acquired the logical name of "plug," and rapidly became the people's choice. Local manufacturers with better equipment than boring knives or chisels, mallet and logs and with ready access to a variety of flavoring sauces put plug in mass production. The toothsome chew, treated with licorice, honey, sugar, rum, spices and other pungent flavors, soon became the chief output of St. Louis tobacco factories.

American manufacturers during the chewing tobacco era were offering a choice of 12,630 brands to their strong-jawed customers. This abundance of products put an extra strain on sales departments searching for a distinctive brand name. Some of the labels were sensible but unimaginative, some were designed for laughs, some were provocative and unexpected. As examples of fancy gone far afield these were among the choice items offered around the turn of the century by manufacturers of chewing tobaccos in Missouri: *My Wife's Hat, Revenge, Lock and Chain, Sweet Buy and Buy, Wiggletail Twist, Scalping Knife, Toss Up.*

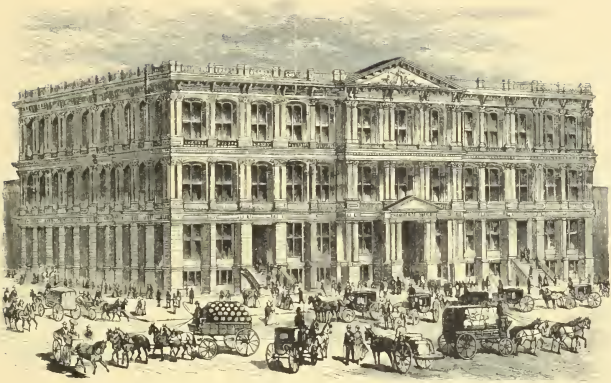
St. Louis—once America's leading tobacco market

By 1890 Missouri was the major tobacco manufacturing state, the industry there having had its start in St. Louis in 1817. For many years the greatest quantity of manufactured plug came from Missouri. Its chief ingredient was Burley from the Ohio Valley, a leaf which readily absorbed the flavoring sauces consumers demanded. In 1914 the state's factories turned out more than 70 million pounds of the commodity—almost 40 percent of total national production—then worth around $35,000,000.

Missouri held third place in tobacco production by 1873, being exceeded in the agriculture only by Kentucky and Virginia. It maintained that rank for some time. A dozen years before World War I it had been observed that

> *Tobacco may be grown successfully in every county in the State. St. Louis is the leading tobacco market in the United States, and there is no reason why this industry should not be developed until Missouri is the leading tobacco producing state in the Union . . . In some counties farmers sell their tobacco crops for more than $100 an acre.*

Good tobacco was then selling for about 10 cents a pound. (In the latest reported year, 1958, Missouri farmers were selling their tobacco for a fraction under 64 cents a pound.) The expectation that Missouri's tobacco agriculture might be expanded, as expressed by



The St. Louis Chamber of Commerce in 1876

the author quoted, was not realized. Tobacco chewing declined noticeably after the war's end and factories moved closer to raw material supplies of cigarette leaf.

Corn produces a famous pipe bowl

Corn in great quantities had long been grown on Missouri's farms. (Before the opening of the 20th century more than one-tenth of the world's crop of the grain was Missouri-grown.)

With all that corn available it was only to be expected that some imaginative person would discover uses of the cob other than fodder or fertilizer. Cornsilk was already being surreptitiously smoked by numerous boys as a preliminary to the delights of real tobacco, still forbidden them by their elders.

John Scharnke, a local farmer, is said to have been the imaginative person with an idea about corn cobs. He may not have been the first to have put the idea to practical use but in the absence of other claimants he should be credited with giving it impetus. In 1869 Scharnke brought to a woodworker at Washington, Missouri, a cob of corn and asked that it be worked into a pipe bowl. The woodworker, Henry Tibbe, was newly from Holland. Thus the first mechanically produced corncob pipe was created. It provided a soothing smoke. White corn, with its large, firm cob, was used—not the smaller, yellow Indian maize.

This "Missouri meerschaum" or "barnyard briar"—a genuine symbol of rural America—had an almost immediate popularity. It brought several factories into existence which profitably produced enormous quantities of "nature's sweetest smoke." By the mid-20's about 20 percent of the corncob pipes, made exclusively in Missouri, was shipped to foreign markets. Washington, Missouri, is still the world's "corncob capital."

Missouri tobacco smoked in native corncob pipes, on the authority of the state's Bureau of Labor Statistics (1914), "soothes to such an extent that business cares and all troubles are quickly forgotten." Furthermore, the same source proudly announced, "the Bureau of Ethnology of the federal government has pointed out that native Missourians are stronger and taller than the native citizens of any other State." That splendid condition was not, of course, directly credited by the Missouri author to the use of native tobacco in corncob pipes.

Had there ever been any doubts about the popularity of corncobs they would have been dispelled by the types

of men who used and praised them. Among them, to name but a few, were such enthusiasts as General MacArthur, Marshal Foch, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and Henry Mencken. Mark Twain, whose boyhood was spent near the center of the corncob pipe industry, is credited with the remark, "If you grow corn to get the cob, you're smart."

The cigarette invades Missouri

A fairly new object in the United States, the paper-covered cigarette was a minor product of Missouri's factories in the 1880's. The Duke family of North Carolina, had entered the field and were vigorously promoting cigarettes. They felt that the Missouri market was ready for expansion. In 1882 only 453,000 cigarettes were produced in the state. (In 1959 the national total was well over a million times that figure.)

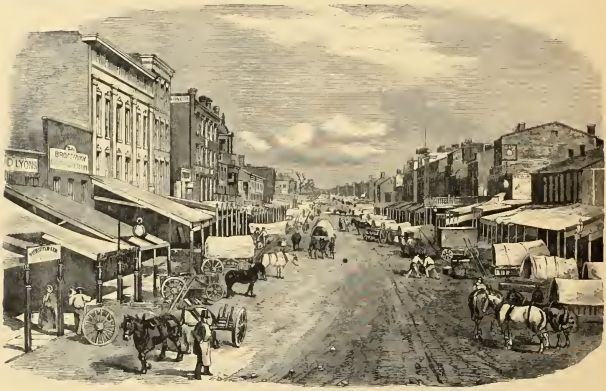
Edward Featherston Small, "fearless lieutenant" of the Duke interests, a master salesman and an ardent cigarette promoter, took charge of the St. Louis territory. The retailers in the area were, however, not interested in his wares. Thereupon Small engaged an attractive widow, a Mrs. Leonard, to call on the trade and promote the firm's brands.

Cigarettes were then still regarded as something of a foreign curiosity, hardly a smoke for virile men, and nothing a genuine lady could possibly be associated with. Unabashed, Mrs. Leonard went enthusiastically to work. The first lady cigarette drummer made headlines, and not only in the St. Louis press. The ensuing publicity

brought in a host of new customers and a most satisfactory sales record for the Leonard-Small team.

By the early years of the 20th century the people of Missouri had made use of tobacco in all its social forms and some of them had made tobacco history. One native, during his adult career, became the Western world's most noted smoker. He was a devotee of the cigar but occasionally puffed a Missouri meerschaum.

When not busy writing books which became American classics, he was expounding the virtues of good tobacco. Frequently, however, he announced that he was forsaking his favorite pastime: smoking. No one believed him. What he was really doing was turning over a new leaf—in search of an equally good cigar. He lived a long, productive life, wreathed in smoke. His name was Mark Twain.



The Broadway, St. Louis, in 1858

Current statistical data on the tobacco industry in Missouri have been supplied by the Agricultural Extension Service (University of Missouri), the Division of Industrial Inspection (Dept. of Labor and Industrial Relations), and the Division of Resources and Development (Dept. of Business and Administration), all of Missouri.

Other data have been derived from information published by the Tobacco Tax Council (Richmond, Virginia) and various publications of the federal government, including "Report on . . . Tobacco," J. B. Killebrew, in *Report on the Productions of Agriculture . . . Tenth Census,* Washington, 1883.

General works which provided valuable information were *History of St. Louis,* J. T. Scharf (1863); *A History of Missouri,* Louis Houck (1908); *Missouri Historical Review* (various volumes), and *The Story of Tobacco in America,* J. C. Robert (1949).

The passage quoted on page 8 is from an article by H. J. Waters in *The State of Missouri edited for The Missouri Commission to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition* by Walter Williams (1904). That on page 10 is from *Missouri. Resources, Advantages, Opportunities,* "Missouri Booster Pamphlet" (1914)—(Prelude to the 35th Annual Report, Bureau of Labor Statistics).