Summer 1989

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The Literature of Three Delectable Kentucky Vices
Part II: Spirits and Tobacco*

William S. Ward

Spirits

Bourbon whiskey—the product of corn and limestone water properly distilled and aged in charred oak barrels—is a unique American phenomenon and is to America what Scotch is to Scotland and brandy is to France. Yet, strange to tell, neither its first maker nor its birthplace can be identified. The fact is that corn whiskey was made in Virginia, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania before Kentucky was settled and that many settlers brought portable stills with them when they crossed the mountains or came down the Ohio River. By the early 1780s, however, it was “Kentucky” whiskey rather than “corn” whiskey that the settlers were making, though the product we know as “bourbon” today did not come into existence until the middle of the nineteenth century or later. “Kentucky” whiskey, that is, did not meet the specifications for bourbon whiskey that were ultimately to be registered in the U.S. Patent Office: namely, that it must be made “from a fermented mash of grain of which not less than 51 percent is corn grain” and that it must be aged in “charred new oak containers” for a minimum of twenty-four months. These last two requirements were for the purpose of contributing mellowness and flavor and giving bourbon its distinctive reddish amber color. How this process was learned is unknown, but apparently it did not originate until after the middle of the century.

Neither is the state of origin of the name “bourbon” known for certain. It seems likely that when Kentucky corn whiskey became widely popular and was shipped down the Ohio River to New Orleans and elsewhere through the port of Maysville, it came to be known by the name of the region adjacent to the port. This area was the original Bourbon County that was carved out of Fayette County in 1785 and that occupied most of northeastern Kentucky. Later, if this explanation is correct, the corn whiskey made elsewhere in the state came also to be known as “bourbon.”
Thus it would seem that in the beginning "bourbon" merely designated Kentucky corn ("white") whiskey; when or where it first came to be aged in new oak containers may never be known.

Interesting though the origins of bourbon whiskey may be, it is the legends and the traditions that have grown up about it that have made the name of Kentucky and bourbon synonymous. Indeed these legends and traditions as they have taken the form of figures of speech extolling the merits of Kentucky bourbon or become the subject of heroic jest, may be said to constitute a special form which the literature has not taken. The beginning and the cornerstone of this not inconsiderable edifice was laid in 1825 when Supreme Court Justice John Marshall (whose father moved from Virginia to Woodford County in 1783) wrote this bouncy couplet:

In the Blue Grass region a paradox was born—
The corn was full of kernel and the Colonels full of corn.

This was, however, merely a good beginning for many other quotable observations and tributes to bourbon, some of which are one-liners such as the one by a Kentuckian who avoided bourbon because merely to think about it made his mouth water—and "I like my whiskey straight." Another device for extolling the merits of Kentucky bourbon is to be found in tales about the unerring taste of the true bourbon connoisseur. One is the story of the host who had just served some of his favorite stock to two guests with taste buds as sensitive as his own. "My, my," he exclaims after the first sip, "this is most irregular! I sense a slight metallic taste in my drink. Does either of you detect it?" "No-o-o," replies one of the guests slowly, "but I do think I detect a slight taste of leather." "No, not quite that," says the other guest; "it is more like a leather dye." And sure enough when the search into the mystery was ended, the just opened vat of favorite bourbon yielded a never fully explained upholsterer's tack from a red leather chair.

More eloquent and more elevated in style, however, have been the eulogies of the mint julep, even though its use is almost ritualistic and generally limited to Kentucky Derby time. All such eulogies, of course, are done tongue-in-cheek, the tone one of mock high seriousness and always accomplished with a just-right twinkle in the eye. Such is J. Soule Smith's recipe for the mint julep:

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Then comes the zenith of man’s pleasure. Then comes julep—the mint julep. Who has not tasted one has lived in vain. . . . Take from the cold spring water pure as angels are; mix it with sugar till it seems like oil. Then take a glass and crush your mint within it with a spoon—crush it around the borders of the glass and leave no place untouched. Then throw away the mint—it is a sacrifice. Fill with cracked ice the glass; pour in the quantity of Bourbon which you want. It trickles slowly through the ice. Let it have time to cool, then pour your sugared water over it. No spoon is needed, no stirring is allowed—just let it stand a moment. Then around the brim place sprigs of mint, so that the one who drinks may find a taste and odor at one draft. When it is made, sip it slowly. . . . No other land can give so sweet a solace for your cares; no other liquor soothes you so in melancholy days. Sip it slowly and say there is no place for the soul, no tonic for the body like Old Bourbon Whiskey.

Just as worthy is this much shorter piece of advice from that distinguished editor of another day, Henry Watterson:

Pluck the mint gently from its bed just as the dew of the evening is about to form upon it. Select the choicer sprigs only, but do not rinse them. Prepare the simple syrup and measure out a half-tumbler of Bourbon whiskey. Pour the whiskey into a well-frosted silver cup, throw the other ingredients away, and drink the whiskey.

But if “Marse” Henry’s ambush of the mint julep seems unexpectedly irreverent, perhaps it is well to note that despite whatever entrapment may have taken place, the central ingredient of Judge Soule Smith’s mint julep—Old Kentucky Bourbon—is enhanced and the mint julep is not really harmed. It is just the way one heroic figure taunts another heroic figure in a sort of epic boast.

Such is the legend, such is the style, such is one segment of the literature itself. It constitutes a sort of charade in which the participants are bigger than life and is done in a style larger than the subject itself and with an aplomb where every nuance has to be just right. Its saving grace is that it does not quite expect to be taken literally and that there has been good fun enough if the
speaker’s poise never falters and he can get down from his high place without stumbling.

The most substantial piece of literature to grow out of what may well be called legal, bottled-in-bond bourbon is Red Likker (1929) by Irvin S. Cobb (1876-1843), written at the urging of the editor of Cosmopolitan Magazine and first published serially, beginning in the March 1929 issue. Though it is not one of Cobb’s best volumes, Cobb took the research for it seriously and visited Central Kentucky and other sections of the state as he interviewed well-known distillers and gathered information on the manufacture, sale, and consumption of bourbon, as well as the tales and legends about it and the vocabulary associated with it.

The novel begins in post-Revolutionary War days when Colonel Isham Bird established his distillery in a frontier settlement; it then traces the history of “Bird and Son” through successive generations down to and including Prohibition days, which was, of course, the period when Cobb was writing the volume. In no way, however, was the volume intended as an argument against Prohibition; it was only a recounting of events in the life of the Bird family and the panoramic scenes against which the events take place. Among the background activities against which the action is viewed are political campaigns, temperance worker rallies, and bootlegger activities. And since Cobb was the author, naturally there is humor throughout the volume, as well as exciting action, adventure, and intrigue.

Cobb was also the author of Irvin S. Cobb’s Own Recipe Book, written for Frankfort Distilleries Incorporated in 1936. The title page declares that the little volume contains a “rollicking dissertation of the joys of King Bourbon” and “authoritative directions for the making of 71 famous drinks.” It is, says Cobb, “by inheritance, by nativity, and by virtue of personal conviction that I claim the right to deal with this pleasing subject.”

Opie Read (1852-1939), according to the Dictionary of American Biography, “loved to drink Kentucky whiskey with kindred spirits.” This pleasure, coupled no doubt with Read’s interest in Southern colonels of the old school, led to his writing A Kentucky Colonel (1890). Read was a Tennessean by birth, but he got his first job in Franklin, Kentucky, where he was a reporter for the Kentucky Patriot but was fired for drinking too much. His second job was in nearby Scottsville, where he worked for the Scottsville Argus. Later he joined the Bowling Green Pantograph,
and still later moved to Louisville, where he worked for Henry Watterson and the Courier-Journal. Thus Read gained first-hand acquaintance with the Commonwealth and with Kentucky manners and customs that he incorporated in A Kentucky Colonel, along with frequent attention to bourbon whiskey and mint juleps.

But it was in 1876 that Read started on the road to fame. In that year he moved to Little Rock, Arkansas and four years later founded the Arkansas Traveler, a humorous weekly newspaper that was to become one of the most widely quoted newspapers in the country. In 1888 he moved to Chicago and thereafter threw his energy into fiction and collecting humorous stories and sketches which he published. One of his novels, The Jucklins (1896), is said to have sold more than a million copies. But Read's brand of humor and story-telling ceased to appeal to the post-World War I generation, and by the time of his death in 1939 few people remembered that he had been a pioneer in journalism, had founded the Arkansas Traveler, had traveled from coast to coast as a lecturer and story-teller on Chautauqua and other lecture circuits, and was the author of more than fifty books.

When in 1791 the federal government imposed an excise tax on the manufacture of alcoholic spirits in order to help retire the Revolutionary War debt, it was unwittingly taking the first step in fostering moonshining, for there were an estimated five hundred small farmers, mostly in Eastern Kentucky, who grew surplus corn that they converted into whiskey as a sort of adjunct to their farming. The imposition of this tax was regarded as an abridgment of personal rights and the free enterprise system. One aggrieved still owner can be allowed to speak for the rest: "We owned our own land and paid our taxes. We owned our own stills and it wasn't nobody's business what we done with our own. Leastways, that's how we figured it." It was, however, the post-Civil War imposition of a high tax following a period of no excise tax that led to the contest between the moonshiner and the federal revenue agents. At the end of the war, with the distilling industry's supply of legal whiskey low, demand big, prices high, and profits good, moonshining became a lucrative business. With the stakes higher and the revenue agents better trained than their predecessors had been, violence was inevitable.

Despite the grim developments that took place, however, there was commonly enough decency and honor among moonshiners and enough respect and sense of fair play among revenue agents
and trial judges to make their relationship one out of which would grow fiction that told of what might be called a friendly adversary relationship. "I never regarded them as doing something evil," said well-respected "revenooer" Big Six Henderson, "just illegal." And to his adversaries that seemed fair enough. There was, of course, a seamier side of moonshining than has been alluded to here, but in the main the sort of tale that has entered literature had some sort of goodness at its core. The corollary to Big Six Henderson as a respected revenooer was the traditional moonshiner who had pride in his product. Real-life "Uncle Scott" Partin was such a person. When he retired after forty years as a moonshiner, he could only lament the low estate into which many of his contemporaries had allowed the art to fall: "Don't take them fellers more than four days to make a run. It took me ten. The only whiskey fit to drink is ten-day whiskey."

But the contest with the Eastern Kentucky moonshiner had a pleasant face in comparison with the unmitigated violence that came between 1920 and 1933 when Prohibition laws produced the booze-runner. The mountaineer and his still remained in business, but the most celebrated of all the operations within the state was one in the "Land-between-the-Rivers" (now the "Land-between-the-Lakes") area, where Golden Pond became the center of a sizable industry. It was here that Al Capone's gang obtained much of the whiskey with which Chicago and much of the Middle West was supplied. With men like Capone, Waxie Gordon, and Dutch Schulz at the head of big-time syndicate operations, it was a time of car-to-car shoot-outs and block-by-block gang-fighting.

Back in the hills some of the traditional moonshiners never abandoned their time-honored ways. They withstood the return of legalized whiskey in 1933 and to this day in spite of temperance crusades, local option laws, and revenue agents with helicopters, walkie-talkies, and other technological devices they manage to survive. "Fi-i-i-i-r-e in the hole!" still remains the traditional warning that revenue agents are in the vicinity. It is a matter of timely interest that as recently as 7 July 1987, the Courier-Journal carried a story with a three-column headline that "William 'Big Six' Henderson is Dead" at the age of 83, and the Lexington Herald-Leader gave equal coverage, including a map of "the land-between-the-rivers" locating Golden Pond, the center of the moonshining activities.

Representative of the fiction in which moonshine plays a role
are action novels set in Eastern Kentucky. Feudists, it should be noted, are commonly associated with moonshiners, for feuding and moonshining came on the scene at about the same time. Indeed, one theory is that feuding grew out of the enmities left over from the Civil War just as moonshining developed because of the excise tax imposed on non-licensed whiskey as a means of paying the war debt. John Fox, Jr. (1863-1919) was the best of the novelists who wrote of the lawless early days on the Kentucky-West Virginia frontier, of feuds and revenge, and, of course, of moonshine and moonshining. The Trail of the Lonesome Pine (1908) is only one—and the best—of the Fox stories that portray the moonshiner with understanding and sympathy, even in sentimental fashion. In the main, Fox portrayed moonshine and moonshining as a part of the normal life of the mountaineer. Even among those with a strong fundamentalist religious bent, few allowed religion to interfere with their enjoyment of corn liquor. Even small boys and women imbibed on occasion, as Fox's "The Compact of Christopher" makes quite clear.

The novels of Charles Neville Buck (1879-1930) also deal with feudists and moonshiners, the best known of which is When Bear Cat Went Dry (1918). The novel is devoted to showing how moonshining stands in the way of progress in the mountains. Here Turner ("Bear Cat") Stacy gives up his excessive drinking and takes it upon himself to rid the countryside of the source of his troubles by smashing every still he can find.

Less talented than Buck or Fox was Lucy Cleaver McElroy (1861-1901), born in Lebanon, whose Juletty (1901) was well received. It is an unlikely tale of a U.S. marshal recuperating from a wound sustained while hunting for an illegal still. Among adventures that involve fox-hunting, racing, and John Hunt Morgan and his men, the marshal falls in love with Juletty, who turns out to be the moonshiner he is trying to catch.

The best of the novels dealing with the mountains and with moonshining as an integral part of the story is Hunter's Horn (1949), by Harriette Arnow (1909-1986). When the story begins, Nunn Ballew has recently used the money he made in the coal mines to buy back the Ballew family's wornout farm. Nunn's success as a farmer, however, has been frustrated by his inability to outwit the red fox that kills his chickens and his young lambs. Time after time Nunn and other fox hunters come home unsuccessful as they put their hounds on the track of the fox: time
after time, disappointed and sullen, Nunn comes home drunk after his fruitless pursuit of King Devil. Family and friends understand his frustration and do not blame him when he drinks too much; neither do they blame him when he sells some of his livestock in order to buy two pedigreed pups with which some day to catch the fox. Even Nunn’s family admires his extravagance and takes pride in the pups—the “onliest real fine thing we’ve ever had”—his friends and acquaintances accord him a sort of backwoods fame. Bootleggers treat him with respect, a store advances him credit, and the whole countryside keeps his secret when one winter he does some moonshining that brings in cash to see his family through. It should be noted also that a hilarious moonshine-triggered brawl takes place during the course of the story.

In *The Four Lives of Mundy Tolliver* (1953) by Ben Lucien Burman (1895-1984) moonshining appears in a context different from that in any of the novels we have just seen. Mundy, a veteran of World War II from Coal Creek, Kentucky, has just come back to pick up the loose threads of his life and is therefore in search of something that will give it meaning. He has, as it turns out, “four lives” in front of him as he searches for understanding and for meaningful relationships with others: life on a towboat as a deck hand, a partnership in a general store on wheels, a job as a shrimpboat fisherman. But the longest of his “lives” occurs when he goes back to Kentucky, tries to save the farm of an uncle with a farming venture that fails to pay off, and stumbles with some misgivings into moonshine. As a result of this life Mundy spends two years in prison. Mundy is, of course, a sort of ordinary Everyman looking for the meaning of life and a place where he can put his roots down. *The Four Lives of Mundy Tolliver* is perhaps Burman’s best novel.

Doubtless the best novel by a Kentuckian dealing with moonshining during Prohibition days is *Shadow of a Cloud* (1950) by Charley Robertson (1907-1981). The principal character is Paul Worden, from Orchard Springs, Kentucky. Paul, who is writing a novel, works at a plant in Detroit, but his rather uneventful life is interrupted when his fellow worker, Max Shafer, convinces him that big money can be made by running moonshine from Kentucky to Detroit. The story has characters that are believable enough, among them Eva, a dipsomaniac; Harry, who plays lonesome music on his guitar; and “Little Preacher,” who knows his Kentucky whiskey. The action, reminiscent of Golden Pond
and the Al Capone, Max Schulz, Waxie Gordon booze-running days, evokes truck stops and rendezvous, bullet-riddled corpses, and the twisted wreckage of cars loaded with whiskey. The novel had a mixed reception. Some readers found it “Absorbingly interesting from start to finish”; others found it “uneven” and “lacking in the significance of Anderson, Norris, or Dreiser.”

During the early years of Kentucky and the early days of Kentucky distilling, the use of whiskey and other hard liquors was commonplace and the church apparently took no official stand. No doubt there were settlers who were staunchly opposed to liquor even as a household “restorative,” but the use of whiskey to pay the salaries of ministers and the frequency with which ministers’ names appear on lists of still operators suggest that neither drinking nor making whiskey was a blot on a person’s name. In fact, one of the best-known names in early Kentucky whiskey annals was that of the Reverend Elijah Craig of Georgetown, who at one time was claimed to be the “inventor” of bourbon whiskey. It is revealing, too, that the minutes of a Kentucky church in 1795 record that after a discussion of whether it is “consistent with true religion . . . to carry on a distilling of spirits,” it was voted that it was “Not inconsistent.”

By the 1790s, when the land had been wrested from the Indians and the first rigors of pioneering were over, the time had come when the less restrained settlers would let off steam and the more restless push on farther West, including the ruffianly keelboatmen and bargemen, who were generally heavy drinkers. Rowdymism was not limited to the river, however, for intoxicants were readily available in the settlements and towns, and flowed freely at a barn-raising or a wedding or any other occasion that seemed worth celebrating. Clearly a serpent was loose in the new Eden, and churches finally began to make an issue of drinking and to press for temperance. By the end of the century revivals and camp meetings were being conducted regularly, the most notable of which was the one at Cane Ridge, in Bourbon County, in August 1801. Apparently no immediate or lasting results occurred, but a drift did slowly emerge and some sentiment for temperance began to form, both in Kentucky and nationally. By 1816 limited statewide prohibition appeared in one state and local option in another; and other states joined the movement during the second quarter of the century. Finally in 1920 the country voted in the Constitutional Amendment known as the Prohibition Act; but whatever public
support Prohibition may have had at first, it soon waned, the illegal manufacture and sale of spirits became commonplace, and gangs and syndicates organized and fought each other in brutal fashion to gain control of the liquor racket. The Prohibition Act was repealed in 1933.

Little purpose would be served by surveying temperance organizations, but it must be noted that Kentucky was the birthplace of the most celebrated temperance agitator of all time. This was Carry Amelia Moore Nation, born in Garrard County in 1846. In the 1880s she began her attacks on “joints” in Kansas by destroying liquor, furniture, pictures, lamps, and anything else her eye fell on, using the hatchet that was to be her distinctive weapon. Carry Nation’s vast energy carried her throughout the United States from California to the East Coast. She was arrested and put in jail thirty times; she was attacked, clubbed, cut, and shot at in small towns and large, including Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where a bartender hit her over the head with a chair. She died in 1911 and was buried in Belton, Missouri, where the inscription on her tombstone reads, “She hath done what she could.”

Though temperance fiction was in plentiful supply during much of the nineteenth century, none of it has lived because of literary merit. Even at the national level, if one starts calling titles to mind, few come readily. First, perhaps, is Ten Nights in a Barroom and possibly after that The Drunkard; or the Fallen, Saved; and second thoughts will remind one that the friendly feeling he has for them has nothing to do with the original purpose of the pieces. Both are melodramas and were written to aid the temperance cause, the first by T. S. Arthur in 1854 and the latter by W. N. Smith in 1844. Besides being read or dramatized in support of temperance lectures, both, as well as other pieces such as Lust, Lucre, and Liquor, were a part of the showboat repertoire, where originally they were played straight and were accepted as just representations of the outside world. By the end of the 1920s, largely by accident, however, showboats learned the art of burlesquing these old melodramas and for a while played to standing-room-only audiences that came to hiss the villain, encourage the hero, and offer advice to the heroine. Here, as with the toasts and eulogies, success came from just-right-tongue-in-cheek high seriousness on the part of the actors, properly in tune with an audience that caught every nuance and by responding in
kind to the action became unofficial members of the cast. No
doubt it is to this burlesque revival rather than to literary merit
that today’s friendly feelings towards these pieces can be traced.

Kentucky authors cannot be said to have written any
temperance “masterpieces” equal to Ten Nights in a Barroom, but
there are two novels that deserve honorable mention. The first of
these is Nellie Bracken (1855), by Mrs. Annie Chambers Ketchum
(1824-1904). The novel has been described as being made up of
“sentiment, unctuous piety, rigid morality, and temperance
propaganda” and the plot as the “tale of Nellie Bracken’s unhappy
marriage, her career as a teacher among some idealized Indians,
and her ultimate reward in the form of a worthy husband.” Mrs.
Ketchum, born near Georgetown, wrote both verse and fiction,
but only Nellie Bracken survives today, not because of intrinsic
merit but because it is an outstanding example of its kind.

Credo Harris (1874-1956) also wrote a temperance novel that
survives for much the same reasons as Nellie Bracken. This is
Toby, a Novel of Kentucky (1912). Toby is the story of a vagrant
whose promising career is ruined by drink. Finally, he is found
guilty of vagrancy and chronic alcoholism and is sentenced, under
a rarely imposed Kentucky law, to be sold to the highest bidder
into one year of servitude. A beautiful girl buys him, reforms him,
and finally marries him. The author was born near Louisville. He
started his career as a journalist in New York City but abandoned
his work there after ten years in order to become a writer of
fiction. He then moved back to Kentucky, where he lived at
Glenview and kept up his journalistic work with the Louisville
Herald.

Tobacco

When the early settlers first came to Kentucky, they often
brought with them an ounce or two of tobacco seed, along with
corn, wheat, and rye seed, and such tools as they could transport.
Nor were they disappointed with the success they had with
tobacco, for tobacco did well in the fertile, loamy soil of Central
Kentucky. Tobacco had, of course, been cultivated for many years
along the Atlantic seaboard, and especially in Virginia and North
Carolina. Through the years different varieties were developed, but
all of them were “dark” tobacco and required heat in the barn for
curing, as well as a slow harvesting process. Years later in
Northern Kentucky there was a “dark” air-cured variety rather similar to the tobacco grown in Northern Virginia and Western Kentucky. It was from this strain that remarkable chance was to produce the White Burley that was to displace “dark” tobacco in Central and Northern Kentucky, make Kentucky the White Burley capital of the world, and profoundly affect the whole tobacco industry.

The first step in this development came in 1863 when George Webb and Joseph Fore in Brown County, Ohio failed to save enough tobacco seed for their 1864 crop. As a result they rowed across the Ohio River and obtained some “Little Burley” seed from George Barkley in Bracken County, Kentucky. The seed came up and did well, but they soon noticed that a number of the plants were of a pale green color. Thinking the plants diseased, they threw them away, but the next year when Webb again used the seed he got from Barkley, the same thing happened again; but this time Webb set the plants in a different field, found that they grew well, and saved the seed from the matured plants. Such were the origins of White Burley tobacco. The new mutant strain, it was discovered, grew more rapidly than other varieties, was easier to harvest, and cured quickly in regular barns. Not only this, it also had a lighter body, a brighter color, and a milder flavor, and it was particularly absorbent of the sweetening and the flavoring that had come to be relished in both chewing and pipe tobacco. Soon, therefore, it was being blended with the “Virginia” darker tobacco for both chewing and smoking. Just ahead, however, was the biggest market of all for the new mild-flavored tobacco—in cigarettes. A rocky road lay ahead for those who grew it, but by 1890 Kentucky grew half of the tobacco grown in the United States, and tobacco—Dark in Western Kentucky and White Burley in Central and Northern—became Kentucky’s chief source of income. The Tobacco Wars lay just ahead.

The Tobacco Wars and Night Rider Days in the Bluegrass Burley belt and its counterpart in the Western Kentucky Dark Tobacco belt differ only in details; the principles involved are the same. The eruption into violence in Western Kentucky was more spectacular, however, and has attracted more writers to it as a subject for literature. The violence did not begin until 1905, but the sources of the trouble go back forty years when tobacco was offered for sale by the planter directly to the manufacturer or exporter. By the 1890s a centralized system came into being in
which the farmer no longer dealt directly with the buyer but took his tobacco to a local warehouse where the tobacco companies sent their buyers. But neither this nor any other plan worked, so that by 1903 farmers organized a crude type of Association (sometimes called "The Pool") in Guthrie, Todd County, and tried to persuade all tobacco growers to put their tobacco in the Association or Pool, where it would be sold and the proceeds distributed. The sign-up was good (perhaps 75%), but the tobacco companies (the Trust) had large reserve stocks which they began to draw upon; furthermore, they began paying higher prices to non-Association members than to Association members. The result was that Association members were lined up against the non-Association members. Feelings ran high, meetings were called, and by 1906 members of the Association organized themselves into groups to force non-members to stop raising tobacco or else become members. Thus came into being the "enforcers," masked men known as Night Riders. As they pressured non-members to join the Association, neighbor came to be aligned against neighbor, and as feelings ran high property was destroyed, lawlessness ran rampant, and no man really felt safe in his home. Plant beds were scraped, men were called out of their homes and barns and beaten, farm equipment was destroyed, even barns and homes were set on fire. Association officials disclaimed any responsibility or sympathy for the lawlessness, but the violence grew until on 1 December 1906, in Princeton, and on 7 December, in Hopkinsville, Night Riders staged their greatest raids. In both raids tobacco storage warehouses and stemming houses were burned. During the weeks following these raids, however, the tension began to subside and the tide of violence to move into Lyon, Trigg, and adjoining counties; the era of the Night Rider was soon to be over. Night Rider activities took place in Central and Northern Kentucky, of course, but the intensity of the encounters never became as great as it was in Western Kentucky.

The literature of tobacco in Kentucky, like the literature of moonshine whiskey, is not without its melodrama and its violence, but the quality of the literature in which tobacco is important is clearly superior to that on moonshine and bourbon. In fact, one would be hard pressed to name any other subject that has interested so many of Kentucky's talented writers. Among these are Edith Summers Kelley, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Jesse Stuart, Caroline Gordon, Wendell Berry, and Robert Penn Warren. Some
of the writing is principally about tobacco itself, but the best of it is more about tobacco as the agency through which character and meaning and universal significance are discovered.

The first of the tobacco novels to be noted is The Heart of the Hills (1912) by John Fox, Jr. (1863-1919), in which Jason Hawn becomes involved in the tobacco wars when he comes from the hills to the Bluegrass to get an education. Tobacco as such, however, is not central to Fox’s story any more than it is to The Time of Man (1926) by Elizabeth Madox Roberts (1881-1941). The trials of Ellen Chesser’s life, first as the daughter of a tobacco-growing sharecropper and then as the wife of one as they seek to have a roof over their heads, clothes to wear, and food to eat, constitute the events in the lives of the people with which the story is concerned, but it is clear that the real concern of the novel is archetypal in nature and that the story is really about man’s journey through life and a search for identity. Ellen’s material and physical journey is a failure, but at the existential level she triumphs and in the end can exclaim, “I’m Ellen Chesser and I’m lovely.”

Caroline Gordon (1895-1981) was another writer in whose novels tobacco had a place, especially in The Garden of Adonis (1937), the novel in which she comes down to contemporary times in her study of agrarianism. Penhally and None Shall Look Back had traced the ills that befell two families that had been planters for generations and had experienced the destruction brought on by the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the rise of industrialism. In The Garden of Adonis one of these families—the Allards—is also contending with the added burden brought on by the Great Depression and a series of summer droughts; for these have wrought havoc with the income from tobacco for both the tobacco planter and the sharecropper.

Tobacco likewise plays a role in what is perhaps Jesse Stuart’s best novel, Trees of Heaven. The story rests heavily on two of Stuart’s most unforgettable characters: the hard-driving, land-greedy, seventy-one-year-old Anse Bushman and a hillbilly sharecropper, Boliver Tussie, who is the opposite of everything that Anse symbolizes. It begins when Anse buys the land on which Boliver has been a squatter all his life; the tension builds as Anse draws up a contract that goes beyond business and forbids the Tussies to make moonshine, attend dances, go fox-hunting, and attend religious revivals more than twice a week. It mounts still
higher when the Tussies fall short on their “moral obligations” but prove to be hard workers and grow good crops, and especially good tobacco, which is the principal source of income of both the landowner and the tenant farmer. Much is revealed one day when Boliver goes to town and gets on a drinking spree. “Town ain’t no place for Boliver,” Anse says to his son; he “hast his faults but he belongs to the dirt same as I belong to the dirt. He belongs to these rough slopes—these rocks and these deep hollers. Be shore, Tarvin, that you bring ‘im back.”

_Hie to the Hunters_ (1950) reveals Stuart’s knowledge of and attention to the details of farm life and the labors of farm people. Thus he writes about the making of the tobacco plant bed and the need to keep it free from weeds, the back-breaking labor of transplanting the plants “by hand” to the field; the need to “worm” the plants as they grow, to “top” them at the right time in order to make the plant “spread,” and to break out the “top suckers” and later the bottom ones. There are details about cutting tobacco when it is ripe and the way the cutter uses his tobacco knife as he splits (or spears) the plant and places it on a stick which has been stuck into the ground to hold it upright. Then there is the way the sticks are hung on tier rails in the barn, the way the plants dry slowly and turn golden brown; after which the cured plants are taken down from the tier rails on a damp day while the leaves are “in case”; and finally how the leaves are stripped from the plant and sorted into grades, tied into “hands,” and again placed on sticks preliminary to hauling the crop to the warehouse to be sold at auction. And not missing is the practice of keeping the “long green” that the farmer saves for smoking or as “chewin’ terbaccer,” nor his marksmanship as he spits the “ambeer” at a spittoon or a knot-hole in the floor or siding of an outbuilding as he passes. Stuart’s stories are full of the lore of tobacco.

The first Kentucky writer to devote an entire novel to tobacco was Edith Summers Kelley (1884-1956), whose _Weeds_ (1923) is a fine novel that was almost entirely ignored when it was first published but was “discovered” by Matthew J. Bruccoli and edited for republication by the Southern Illinois University Press in 1972. The central character is Judith Pippinger, an above-average girl who was born to the life of a sharecropper. Though she rebels against the usual place of the women in the kitchen and her role as a wife and mother, preferring work in the fields to domestic
life, she marries, begins to have children, and is gradually beaten down and trapped by the monotony and drudgery of the life she lives. It is a story of sadness and tragedy—not in the sense that something tragic happens and that life does not go on beyond that point but rather that it does go on. Finally, in the words of the author, she would as a mother "go on for her allotted time bearing and nursing babies and rearing them as best she could. And when her time of childbearing was over, she would go back to the fields, like other women, and set tobacco and worm and top tobacco, shuck corn, and plant potatoes." Yet the novel is not a tale of uneducated, deprived people who have ceased to struggle. The author so handles Judith and her story that her disappointment in life is the disappointment of all women and her fate not merely pathetic but tragic.

Next among the novels devoted almost entirely to tobacco was Green Bondage (1931) by Frances Ogilvie (1902-1942). Ogilvie was born in Princeton, Caldwell County, and drew upon incidents she had witnessed or knew about when she was a child, among them the burning of three tobacco warehouses in Princeton. The story itself is a tale of two generations of tobacco farmers in Caldwell County; from the death of Sam Davis, killed while nightriding, to the time of his daughter's settling in for a life of hard work just as her parents had done before her. It is a realistic story that both portrays the toil and drudgery of tobacco farming and gives an account of the Tobacco Wars.

It was to be eight years before there was another novel principally about tobacco. This was Robert Penn Warren's Night Riders (1939). Warren (1905- ), like Frances Ogilvie, was born in the geographical center of the area that spawned the Tobacco Wars and at the time Night Riders were striking fear into the farmers who refused to join the Planters' Protective Association; as a boy he listened to the tales of terror and pillage. Like Elizabeth Madox Roberts's The Time of Man, however, Night Riders is only secondarily concerned with either tobacco or the facts of farming. Warren is concerned with the truth of human nature and it is Percy Munn on whom he focuses. At the narrative level the story deals with the way Munn is drawn into the Planter's Protective Association and then into its leadership and away from his peaceful, ordered life as a lawyer. Thus at the core of the novel is the quest for selfhood, a common theme in Warren. At first Munn is seeking higher prices for the tobacco of the farmers and is
principally concerned with things that affect him. Then he joins the Association and begins to enjoy the involvement, then the leadership role, the decision-making, and eventually the mob aspect of his activities, including the violence. Still he feels himself a hollow man who finds no fulfillment in what he does; nor does he feel himself on the wrong course, an essential preliminary to beginning the painful journey to selfhood. Finally, accused wrongly of killing a man, he goes into hiding and is shot by soldiers without gaining a redeeming sense of himself.

Four more novels remain to be noted. One is *Leaf Gold* (1941), by William Woodrow Chamberlain (1914- ), a native of Glasgow. The novel portrays the demanding year-round cycle of planting, growing, and harvesting, and the hardships of tenants; but unlike Edith Summers Kelley’s *Weeds*, it is not a novel of protest. There is hard work aplenty, and there are disappointments and even tragedy, but there are rewards, too. Among landlords there are those who are generous and charitable, and among tenant-farmers there are those who are failures because of their own shiftlessness. The author is even-handed and the story is a warm-hearted one in which a tenant with a love for the soil and a willingness to work has a reasonable hope of owning his own land.

The most popular tobacco novel ever written came the following year. This was *Drivin’ Woman* (1942) by Elizabeth Pickett Chevalier (1896-1984). The central character, “Merry” Collier Moncure, was described by *Time* magazine as “at once a Jezebel, a faithful wife, a W .C .T .U . pledgee, a patrician, a pauper, a farmer, a mother of ingrate daughters by a worthless husband, a passionate creature, an unsatisfied creature, a high-grade businesswoman.” The novel became a Literary Guild selection and sold 300,000 copies during its first six months in print and was made into a movie by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Chevalier, who was born in Chicago, came to the one novel she wrote one day in 1928 when she was working on a movie with David O. Selznick and a childhood memory of her grandfather’s farm in Mason County burst upon her consciousness. This memory was one of a moonlit night with Night Riders pounding down a country road and moments later a barn blazing against the horizon. With this as a starter she returned to this Tuckahoe Ridge farm (still in the family) and for eight years learned everything she could about farming, and especially about tobacco. Not only does she go back to Night Riders, she even goes back to the beginning.
of the tobacco trusts. Some critics accused her of writing with one eye, maybe both, on Hollywood, but *Time* magazine concluded its review by saying that Merry Moncure “may turn out to be the most satisfying heroine since Scarlett O'Hara.”

The next and last novel devoted to tobacco here is *Send for Miss Cora* (1948) by Charley Robertson (1907-1981), who grew up in Smithland, Livingston County, and was familiar with the growing and marketing of tobacco in the between-the-rivers section of Western Kentucky. It is the secondary plot of the story that gives the novel its title in that it deals with Miss Cora and Bayless Calhoun, a man of great respect and goodness in the community who sends for Miss Cora when domestic chores need to be done. The central story is about the teen-age Lennie Bogard, who one night finds his father dead, murdered by Night Riders. For three years, obsessed with his desire for retribution, Lennie seeks to learn the identity of the masked man who rode the gray pacer at the head of the Night Riders group that killed his father. In time he learns that Bayless Calhoun—Miss Cora’s friend, Lennie’s own benefactor, and the father of his fiancée—is the guilty one. The way Lennie deals with the problem of retribution provides what one reviewer calls a “natural, unforced ending” that need not be revealed here.

Since *Send For Miss Cora* there has not been another novel by a Kentucky writer that deals with tobacco as its principal subject matter. Indeed attention to farming of any sort has been small. One principal spokesman remains: Wendell Berry (1934- ). Tobacco is a part of the subject matter with which he deals, but as with Elizabeth Madox Roberts and Robert Penn Warren, Berry’s concerns are larger in their scope. He is concerned with the land and man’s relationship to it, with a sense of community in the natural and social order, with the centrality of man’s relationship to the land, and through the land to the universe.

*This article on “The Literature of Three Delectable Kentucky Vices: Racing, Spirits, and Tobacco” is an outgrowth of the author’s *A Literary History of Kentucky*, published in 1988 by the University Press of Tennessee. For any overlap between this article and that volume permission has been granted by the University of Tennessee Press. Because of the length of the article *The Kentucky Review* published the segment on racing in its spring issue, that on “Spirits and Tobacco” in the present number.
NOTES

Despite the abundance of detailed facts and figures in the foregoing pages, most of the information they convey is in the public domain and is familiar to those who write about Spirits, Tobacco, and Racing. Few writers have advocated theories or developed theses peculiarly their own that bear their unmistakable trademark and require footnotes to acknowledge indebtedness. Yet a newcomer to the subjects discussed here has a heavy obligation to the books he reads and draws upon; but if he documented everything he had not known before he read them, he would produce a cumbersome thicket of footnotes. The titles which follow suggest the author's indebtedness and provide a reading list for anyone who wishes to read further.


1Lawrence S. Thompson, *The Kentucky Novel* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1953), 74-75.
2*Time*, 7 August 1942, p. 76.