

New crop leaves Morrow fields in 'mint condition'

First County mint crop is now being distilled

By Rick Steelhammer

Portable stills are operating in the irrigated croplands between North Lexington and Boardman.

Don't get the wrong idea, the mobile distilleries are not producing white lightning. But they are manufacturing an equally valuable, and infinitely more legal product—mint oil.

Morrow County's first commercial crop of mint entered the distilling boilers at Far West Farms last week, a bit behind schedule due to the unseasonably wet weather we have been experiencing.

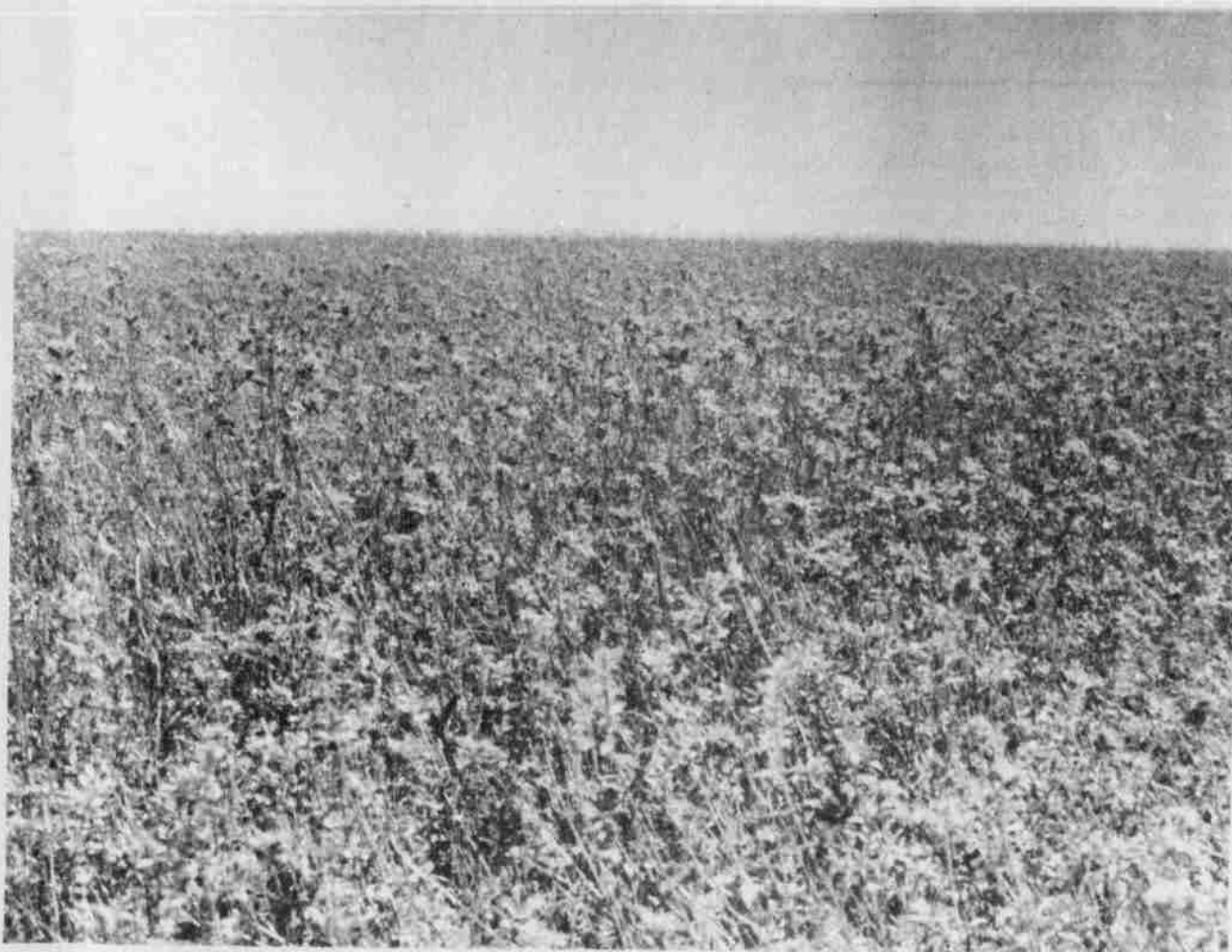
A half-dozen County farmers have devoted a total of about 215 acres to the fragrant, green herb. It appears that mint has sunk its roots firmly into the Morrow County agricultural picture.

augured into a large holding wagon. The wagon is then brought to the still, where the mint is cooked and the oil condensed.

On a productive acre of mint ground, about eight tons of chopped mint will be yielded, which in turn yields about 70 pounds of oil. "Mint is the only crop I know of that can be carried in the back of a pickup truck at the end of harvest," noted Morrow County Extension Agent Harold Kerr.

While the yield is relatively small, noted Towery, "one pound of mint oil will flavor 16,500 sticks of chewing gum."

The Scotch Spearmint variety being raised by Far West was last year used as the main source of flavoring for Freshen-Up



While a certain amount of mint oil will be produced locally in years to come, the real bread and butter for Morrow County mint producers is expected to come from selling disease-free, certified root stock to other Northwest mint growers.

All of Morrow County is included in a Mint Disease Control Area, to guard against the introduction and spread of verticillium wilt disease. All County mint growers must use only root stocks that have been certified by Oregon State University, and their mint fields must be inspected annually by OSU officials to guarantee that verticillium wilt has not entered the county.

The equipment used in harvesting Morrow County's first mint crop is either brand new, or has been sterilized to guard against introduction of the wilt disease.

Far West Farms launched its mint program two years ago, with 1,500 "nuclear" plants, which yielded enough root stock to allow a 15-acre stand to be raised the following year. This year, Far West has a full circle—about 128 acres—devoted to Scotch Spearmint, making it the largest certified field of the mint variety in the world. Far West also is growing three varieties of certified peppermint stock.

"The inspector said this is the best field he inspected this year," said Bill Towery, a Madras mint grower, who is a partner in the Far West venture.

When mint ripens, it is mowed into rows with a swather, just like hay. Then, a tractor-pulled chopping machine drives up the cured windrows, with the chopped mint

brand chewing gum.

Jim Kindle of Madras, who designed, built and operates the still being used to process the Far West mint crop, said that his mobile distillery can process about 30 acres of mint per day. The still's holding tank has a capacity of 7 to 8 tons, depending on moisture content, with each load taking about 90 minutes to be processed into oil.

The product that remains after the oil has been extracted from mint may be used as cattle fodder.

While use as a flavoring agent may be the only commercial purpose for mint oil, Kindle said the fragrant liquor has received some use as a home remedy for arthritis and the treatment of burns.

While mint oil prices peaked at a whopping \$8-12 dollars per pound for peppermint oil last year, sellers this year are lucky to get \$4-5, according to Towery. Scotch spearmint oil marketed for a sky-high \$16 per pound last year, but is currently selling for about \$7, he added.

"The market goes in cycles," he said. "You've got to expect to live with that."

Oregon currently far and away leads the nation in peppermint production, with 58,000 acres devoted to the crop out of 104,000 acres grown in the entire U.S.

Certified root stock from Morrow County is expected to be mainly used in plantings in the Madras area of Central Oregon, in Eastern Washington, and in the Willamette Valley—the region's mint-growing hotspots.

Steps involved in harvesting mint are shown clockwise from top in series of photos. After mint ripens (top), it is swathed into windrows, chopped, and loaded into wagon. Wagon is then brought to portable still for processing into oil. Mulch that is left after distilling may be used for cattle feed.

