

Distillery's Trouble Shooters Seek Leaky Bourbon Barrels In Plants

By JOHN G. DIETRICH
 OWENSBORO, Ky. (UPI) — A handful of wooden plugs and a sensitive nose are the tools used by 155 men whose job is to prevent their employers and the United States government from losing millions of dollars a year in revenue.

These "sniffers" hunt for leaks in barrels of aging bourbon whisky stored in bonded warehouses. Each gallon is worth \$10.50 in revenue to the U.S. Treasury when it is withdrawn from the warehouse.

Most of the world's supply of bourbon whisky is still made in Kentucky—none, however, in Bourbon County where it was first distilled and from which it derived its name.

Common sight in the Blue Grass state is the open-rick whisky warehouse, built of wood and sheathed in galvanized iron. It is open to the rigors of winter and the heat of summer, a weathering process that helps give bourbon whisky its distinctive taste.

These dark warehouses, guarded by Treasury agents, are laden with white oak barrels, piled three high, five deep and ranged on racks separated by one-foot runways.

In order to squeeze along these catwalks, a leak hunter must keep his waistline trim. He carries the tools of his trade—a miner's hat with its lamp, a hammer, a punch and pockets full of small cedar pegs and wedges.

One such "sniffer," is Robert Shiver, 61, the employe of an Owensboro distillery (Glenmore). He is tall, thin and sharp-nosed, with a knack for sniffing out leaks that is legendary at the distillery.

A former coal miner and riverboat hand, Shiver is the veteran among the distillery's six leak hunters. Their domain consists of the dark runways and corridors of 20 five-story warehouses containing more than 18 million gallons of aging whisky in 368,000 barrels.

Uncle Sam considers excessive leakage an unnecessary loss of

revenue, so Shiver and his mates systematically inspect the 55-gallon American white oak barrels.

During the summer months, Shiver is particularly busy, since the heat builds up pressure in barrels and an imperfection can result in anything from a slow drip to a bursting barrel.

The leak hunters have made bursting barrels a rarity, however.

They move slowly through rows, sniffing for the tell-tale odor of escaping whisky — which they are able to detect immediately, even through the general odor of whisky in its various stages permeates the whole warehouse.

To Shiver, the smell of leaking whisky is like the sound of a snapping twig underfoot in the still of a deep forest. He tracks his quarry by sniffing along the runways to the point where the odor is strongest; from there, he knows he must go to the barrels resting on the floors directly above, since the fresh, heavy bourbon vapors travel downward.

Agricultural Career Good

High school students returning to school this fall might well give thought to preparing for college career in agriculture. So points out Tulelake Farm Adviser Ken Baghott of the University of California Division of Agricultural Sciences.

He says, "Agriculture is a big industry and it offers almost unlimited job opportunities to the college graduate."

Recent surveys indicate that 15,000 new agricultural college graduates are needed every year in this country, but that only 7,000 are available. He also points out that too many students consider agriculture as solely for those who raise livestock or grow crops. As important as these are to our economy, agriculture includes much more.

Usually Shiver can spot the leak and quickly repair it with his cedar pegs and wedges. When a serious leak cannot be repaired on the spot, he marks it as "a cripple," and it is removed, under government supervision, from bonded storage for major repairs.

Farm Adviser Baghott, who also serves as the college entrance adviser for the University of California, states that many allied businesses now serve agriculture. These include engineers who design tractors and other farm equipment, chemists who develop new sprays, food technologists who find new ways of retaining the fresh qualities of our foods, food buyers, and suppliers, and many others.


Home economics graduates also have many opportunities for a variety of positions.

"High school students may well begin planning early with their counsellors so that they will meet the entrance requirements of the University when they apply for admission," states Baghott. More information on careers in agriculture and home economics can be obtained from the University Farm and Home Advisers' Office, Tulelake.

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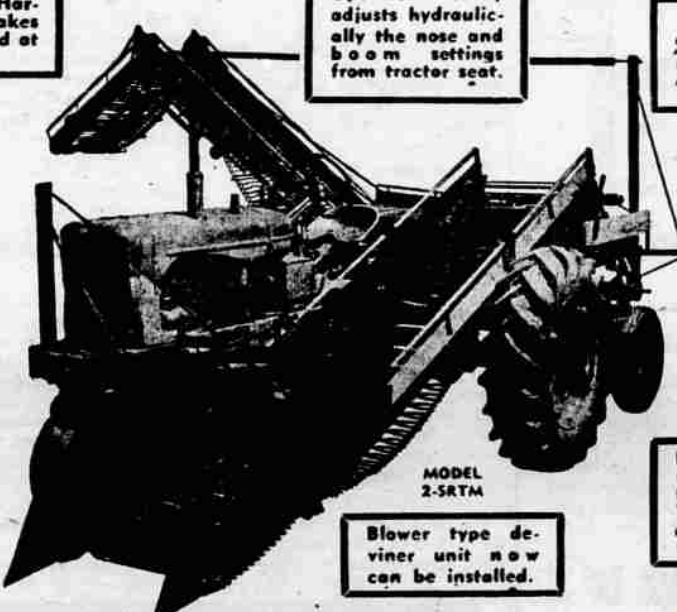


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