

**“Kentucky bourbon is a well-respected product; one that people are proud of and are proud to work in.”  
-Elmer T. Lee**



Even though it wasn't until 1964 that bourbon whiskey was recognized as a distinctly American product through a joint resolution of Congress, the history of the spirit reaches back almost 200 years before that to early Kentucky settlers. While we aren't sure who coined the term bourbon, it most likely reflects the large number of early whiskey distillers from Bourbon County. The name was first used in a newspaper advert in 1821 and by the 1840s the term was widely used to distinguish Kentucky's corn whiskey. By 1891, Kentucky had 172 distilleries with the largest daily mashing capacity in the nation. In 1897, the Bottle-in-Bond Act created standards for uniformity and in 1936 today's standards to identify all American whiskeys were set by the Federal Alcohol Administration Act.

As standardizations were developed and popularity of the spirit grew, a new breed of craftsmanship emerged with the title of master distiller. Often these individuals come from generations in the bourbon industry and all learn their trade through long apprenticeships. This tradition is reflected in the story of Kentucky native Elmer T. Lee, who joined the George T. Stagg Distillery as a maintenance engineer in 1948. Lee quickly rose to plant engineer, then plant superintendent and eventually to the shared title of plant manager and master distiller. In addition to closely guarding the distillery's unique recipe, like other master distillers, Elmer oversaw much of the distillery's modernization until his retirement in 1985.

Oral histories with Elmer T. Lee and other bourbon industry employees can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.

“Pass the Word” is a discovery tool for oral histories throughout the state of Kentucky. To learn more about this topic, visit <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.