

More Wheat and Better Wheat

“Resurrect Wheat Farming in California,” Said the Sperry Flour Company, With Eight Mills to Feed—George McLeod Did the Job

By Albert E. Mead

STOCKTON, CALIFORNIA, harbors intermittently a big touring car, painted white, that is said to be the best-known automobile on the Pacific slope. In two years this big white touring car has traveled more than 65,000 miles. It has poked its tapering nose into nearly every byway in California. It has parked in front of hundreds of country homes. It has acquired an identity that is linked with the identity of the busy man that drives it. In rural California, when farmers see that big white car cruising the winding roads they say, “There goes George McLeod.”

George R. McLeod is superintendent of the agricultural department of the Sperry Flour Company, which has its headquarters in Stockton. The Sperry Flour Company is the largest milling company west of the Mississippi River and the second largest in all America.

McLeod drives that big white touring car because he aims to reach the farmers, the wheat growers, on their native heath; and he aims to reach the wheat growers in order that he may induce them to do two things: to plant more wheat and to plant better wheat. There's a reason.

In 1896, to go back a bit in agricultural history, California produced 53,000,000 bushels of wheat. But that was California's banner year. Thenceforth, year after year, the state's yield of wheat declined. Several factors were responsible. Many of the growers of wheat were beginning to believe that their soil had been exhausted by many plantings; and, in something of a panic, they were turning to other crops. Others, dazzled by the prospect of quick fortunes in fruits, were converting their grain lands into orchards. Year after year the wheat acreage in California kept shrinking. In 1918, just to indicate the trend, the annual yield had dropped to 7,000,000 bushels.

What of it? Who suffered? Except, possibly, for a few unfortunate but somewhat hazy individuals in Russia or China or some place, the world at large didn't starve. Within California itself, very likely, none of the erstwhile growers of wheat went broke



George R. McLeod examining wheat in a field that formerly produced alfalfa.

because they had turned to other crops; indeed, the majority of them prospered.

Who, then, should have worried? The Sperry Flour Company might have worried. Flour is made from wheat. To keep its eight mills running—eight mills that grind out daily some 12,000 barrels of flour—and to provide a product for its forty-one sales offices to sell, the Sperry Flour Company was going to need, every year, a great deal of wheat. If the business of the company was to grow from year to year as a business should, the Sperry Flour Company was going to need increasing quantities of wheat. If the Sperry standards of quality were to be maintained, the Sperry Flour Company was going to need increasing quantities of high-grade wheat. And from year to year wheat was becoming more and more unpopular with California growers; from year to year the average quality of wheat was deteriorating; and from year to year the supply was dwindling. Here, indeed, was something the Sperry Flour Company might have worried about, something convincingly concrete, distinctly disquieting and immediately imminent.

Instead of worrying, however, the Sperry Flour Company did some work, some missionary work. The company bought a farm near Stockton and set up within its organization an agricultural department. On the farm the agricultural department began experimenting with wheat. The company said to George McLeod, head of the agricultural department: “A part of your job is to resurrect wheat farming in California.” Then the company fitted George McLeod with his big white touring car and told him, in effect, if not in so many words, to go to it.

McLeod went to it. He filled the fuel tank of the big white touring car, packed his ample bulk behind the steering wheel and headed for the country. He took a look at the general wheat growing situation. He asked many questions. He made a noise, in fact, like a salesman surveying his market. He felt, he says, like a salesman exploring a new territory. From experience

he knew how an exploring salesman feels. He has sold goods. At one stage in his career he covered, as a selling territory, all the continent of Australia; and in that man-size territory he sold a line of goods that ranged from folding umbrellas to steam tractors.

“Funny, wasn't it?” McLeod said to me. “There I was on the buying side of the business, for our agricultural department is concerned, of course, with the supply of raw materials. Yet I was confronted with a selling job; and all that I had to sell was an idea—a double-barreled idea.”

First, then, McLeod surveyed his market. He talked with the growers of wheat and quizzed them about their problems and difficulties. He went into the orchards and alfalfa ranches and rice fields that had been wheat farms and questioned their owners about their reasons for abandoning wheat. He got the point of view of the farmers, his prospective customers, to whom later he was to sell his double-barreled idea. Then he went back to headquarters at Stockton for selling ammunition.

The agricultural department, experimenting on the laboratory farm just

outside of Stockton, had evolved some data about wheat farming. As head of the department McLeod had had a hand in the experimenting. He knew what the Sperry Flour Company had learned about growing wheat; and from his survey of the field in the big white automobile he knew what the farmers thought about wheat raising.

It was at this stage, approximately, that McLeod turned author. He took his pen in hand and addressed a communication to the farmers of California. The communication he called a bulletin; and that bulletin was the first of a long series in a similar vein that has been going out by mail from McLeod's office in Stockton to some 2,000 California farmers ever since. McLeod is of the school of salesmen who believe in the liberal use of the mails.

In his first epistle to the Californians McLeod minced no words. He went straight to the heart of the subject. In describing California's dereliction in wheat he called a spade a spade. He broadened his point of view to describe the world-wide situation.

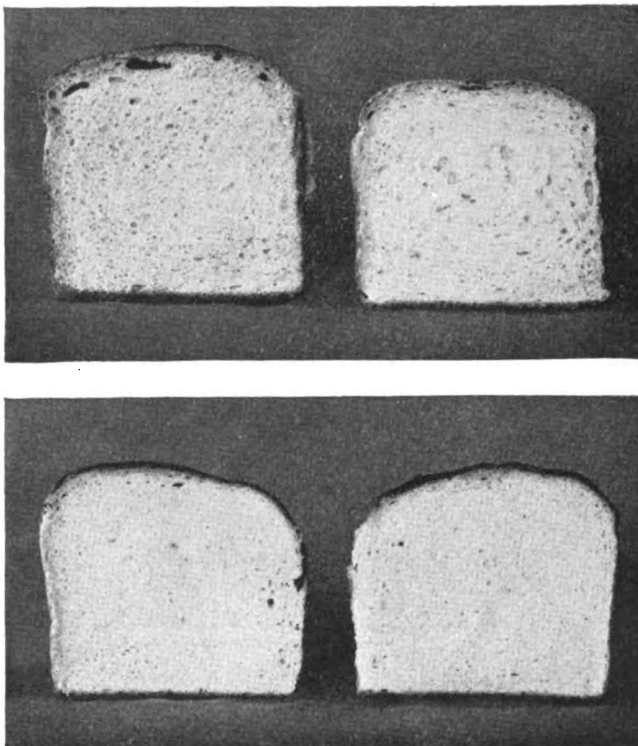
"According to Secretary Hoover," McLeod wrote to the farmers, "Europe will require this year—1919—a minimum of 700,000,000 bushels of wheat and a maximum of 850,000,000 bushels. Recent estimates indicate that the United States will produce 920,000,000 bushels, instead of the 1,250,000,000 bushels estimated on May first. Our requirements for stock and poultry feeds, for carry-over and for seed will amount to 700,000,000 bushels, leaving for export only 220,000,000 bushels. The export surplus in Australia and Argentina amounts to 500,000,000 bushels; but recent reports indicate that 50,000,000 bushels of Australia wheat must be shipped to famine-stricken India.

"Therefore, the total world's surplus for export to Europe will be only 670,000,000 bushels; and this is 30,000,000 bushels less than the minimum European requirement and it makes no provision whatever for shipments to the suffering millions of Russia."

Thus, in statistics, he showed the wheat growers their market.

The same bulletin, the first of the series, had something specific to say about barley. In terms of salesmanship, barley was a competitor. Barley was one of the grains to which the growers of California had turned when they abandoned wheat. McLeod knew as well as did the growers themselves that barley farmers in California

had been doing right well. Barley prices had soared. On the Chicago market the quotation had touched \$2.60 a hundredweight and in Europe the price for a hundred pounds of California barley had climbed to \$3.16. In any undertaking to sell California farmers the two-phase idea of planting more wheat and planting better wheat, McLeod well knew, he would have to deal with the obstacle of barley and its prestige. In his first bulletin



Above, bread made of flour from inferior wheat; below, bread made of flour from Early Baart.

McLeod attacked the obstacle, attacked it openly and decisively.

Barley is a stock food; its price fluctuations are regulated by the price fluctuations of oats and corn. "In a very few months," McLeod wrote to the farmers, "the United States will be harvesting a crop of corn estimated at more than 2,500,000,000 bushels. This, with the oat and barley crop already harvested, will provide an enormous supply from which Europe can fill her pressing needs. There is also the Argentine corn crop, which is now being shipped to Europe at the rate of 50,000 tons a week. * * * If California farmers should raise 1,000,000 tons of barley and there was abnormal export requirement of only 500,000 tons, California would have a surplus of 350,000 tons for which there would be no market. Every factor points to a high price for wheat and a relatively low price for corn, oats and barley."

Thus McLeod laid the groundwork of a selling campaign. Thus he effected his approach and prepared to get down to cases. And in later bulletins he did get down to cases. Farmers, he knew, were thinking about their

soil. Had wheat exhausted the plant food in the ground? Were the respective soils in their respective farms good soils for wheat? Thus McLeod, in one of his bulletins, discussed soils:

"The only soils in California that are not suitable for wheat are the peat and muck formations on the deltas of the San Joaquin and Sacramento Rivers. With other soils it (raising wheat) is mostly a matter of preparation, of seed selection, of moisture, of drainage and of time of planting. * * *

"The old claim that California wheat lands have been played out is a fallacy. This year many fields are yielding as much as they did thirty-five years ago. A large amount of California's original wheat land is now planted to orchards, vineyards, alfalfa and rice; but there are still available many thousands of acres of pasture land, sandy and clay loams, that will produce six to twelve sacks (thirteen to sixteen bushels) of wheat per acre at a good profit to the grower. * * *

"Boiled down to the last analysis, any soil that will grow grass, trees, shrubs, barley or vines, will grow wheat."

Preparation of the soil, this bulletin emphasized, was the important consideration. Very well; a later McLeod bulletin got down to cases on soil preparation. It read:

"Probably the most successful California method of rendering the insoluble ingredients of the soil available for wheat is summer fallowing. The land should be plowed in the fall after the first rain and allowed to stand rough through the winter. In the spring it should be plowed again and harrowed to make a covering to retain moisture. If in the following fall there are early rains it is best to allow the weeds, seeds and so forth to germinate and get a good start and then to plow these under and seed before November 15 if possible. If no early rains come, then the seed should be drilled into the dry ground so that it will be ready to germinate when the rains do come and thus have a chance to get ahead of the weeds."

This same bulletin discussed conservation of moisture in the earth by the various expedients of harrowing, mulching, breaking up the plow sole or "pan" by the use of the deep-chisel cultivator and so on. It went into the matter of drainage and dwelt upon the paramount importance of good drainage. It told how to get rid of weeds.

Technic, farming technic, all this. All of McLeod's earlier bulletins