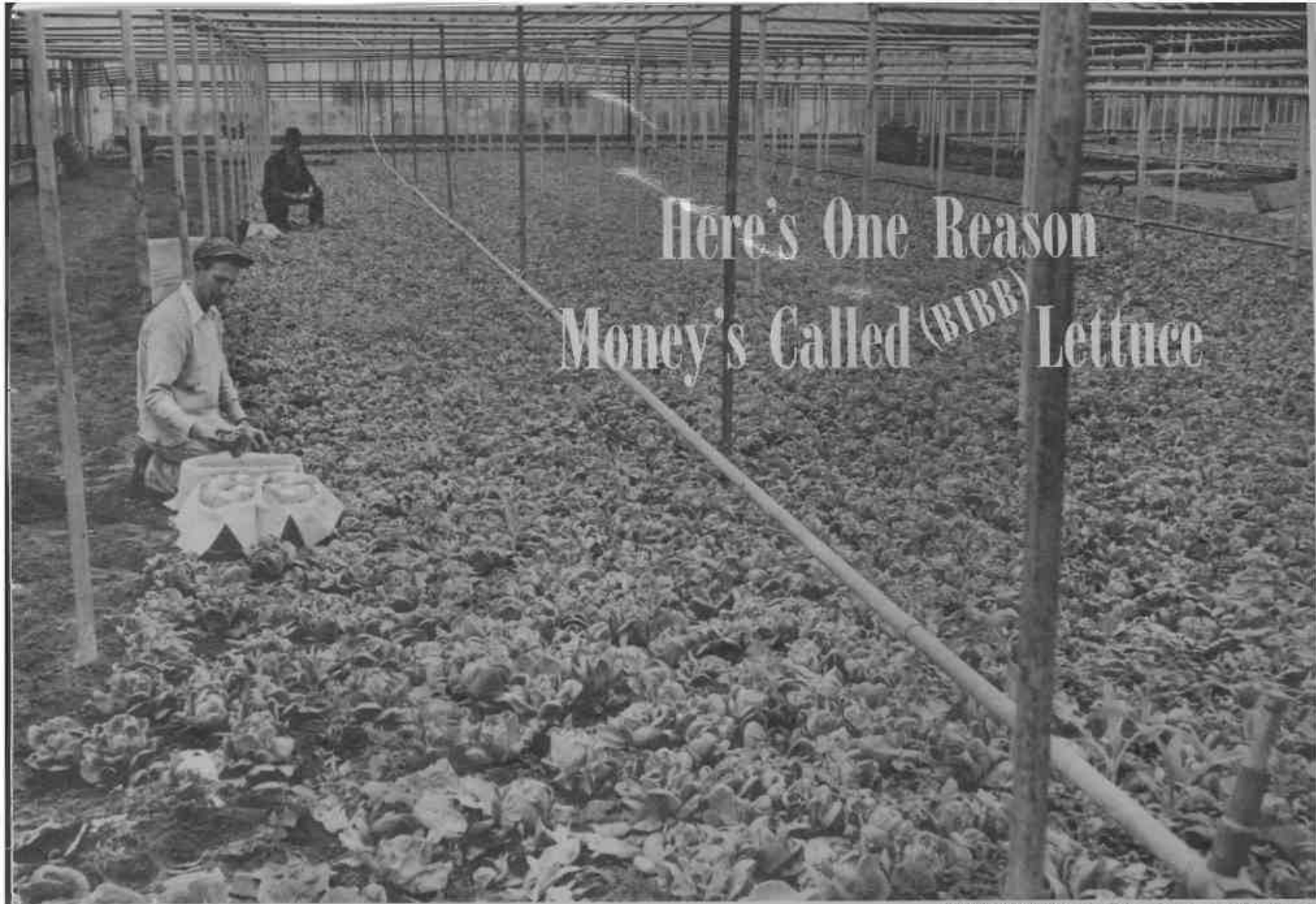


# Here's One Reason Money's Called (BIBB) Lettuce



William Genenwein, foreground, packs heads of Bibb lettuce he grew at 3038 Wilson. He also produces Bibb lettuce in Texas.



Seedlings p...  
thinned for



Transplant...  
thinned for

At its peak wintertime wholesale price of 50 cents a pound,  
this delicacy, born in Kentucky, brings growers a tidy sum

By JOHN R. CLOWES

**A** LITTLE over 11 years ago The Courier-Journal carried a story about a gentle, old man named Jack Bibb who lived in Frankfort, Ky., and who propagated the delightful lettuce that bears his name.

Bibb lettuce was born in old Jack's declining years. He was 80 when he first began giving it away. That's all the stuff was for several years: just a kindly gesture from dear old Mr. Bibb to his appreciative friends and neighbors. It was not patented or in any way protected. It wasn't ballyhooed and it wasn't even named at first. And for a long time nobody but the old man grew it at all.

Upon learning of this most casual beginning, many people whistle gently and say something about how lucky we are that it didn't die out. And there is some ground for the remark. (Unless, ahem, you happen to be a brilliant and profound student of human nature.) Jack Bibb is supposed to have developed a zinnia that was perfumed like a rose. And that horticultural triumph has unquestionably slipped from human knowledge, if, indeed, it ever existed. All the zinnias I ever smelled had strayed a long way from the rose. In fact, they carry a strong suggestion of Brussels sprouts. Sprouts, moreover, that badly need culling.

But there never was any real danger of Bibb lettuce dying out, not since that first gourmet munched a few leaves and suddenly sat bolt upright and surveyed the other diners with his little piggy eyes aglow and filled with a wild surmise like that in the eyes of the man on a peak in Darien. That is the result of a deeply rooted function in our subconscious; the same inventiveness that first wedded hog jowls with black-eyed peas, fish with chips and

whisky with soda. It never forgets a good flavor.

Much ancient wisdom has vanished in the mists of time but it's safe to assert that none of it was any good to eat. We no longer retain the skill that fashioned clay pipes in Thebes. Nobody knows how they built the pyramids in Egypt. And men once knew how to drag a wife around by the hair and make her like it. Nuggets of knowledge of incalculable value that have gone forever. But let one insignificant Chinaman set fire to his pigpen of a house and look what happened. Human beings will be eating roast pork till doomsday.

**G**ETTING back to Bibb lettuce, though, a recent check-up shows that it has not spread as rapidly as might have been expected. Not in the sense of a large-scale crop or even a marketable volume. The lettuce itself, once the seed became available, was a close runner-up to Puck in the way of girdling the earth. The Bunton Seed Company sells Bibb seed in 40 states—42 if Alaska and Hawaii ever get the nod. Lettuce fanciers have grown Bibb in dozens of foreign countries for years.

Curiously enough, California has been found to be the best place for producing Bibb seed. Almost all the commercial Bibb seed comes from there. But the lettuce itself is still not a good crop there. One local company, in fact, Perrone & Campisano, ships Bibb lettuce by air express to a regular customer in California. (Peel me a grape, there, Bledsoe!)

There are a number of good reasons why Mr. Jack's lettuce has failed to get itself into every grocery in the nation. The Genenweins, who held a tight little family monopoly on

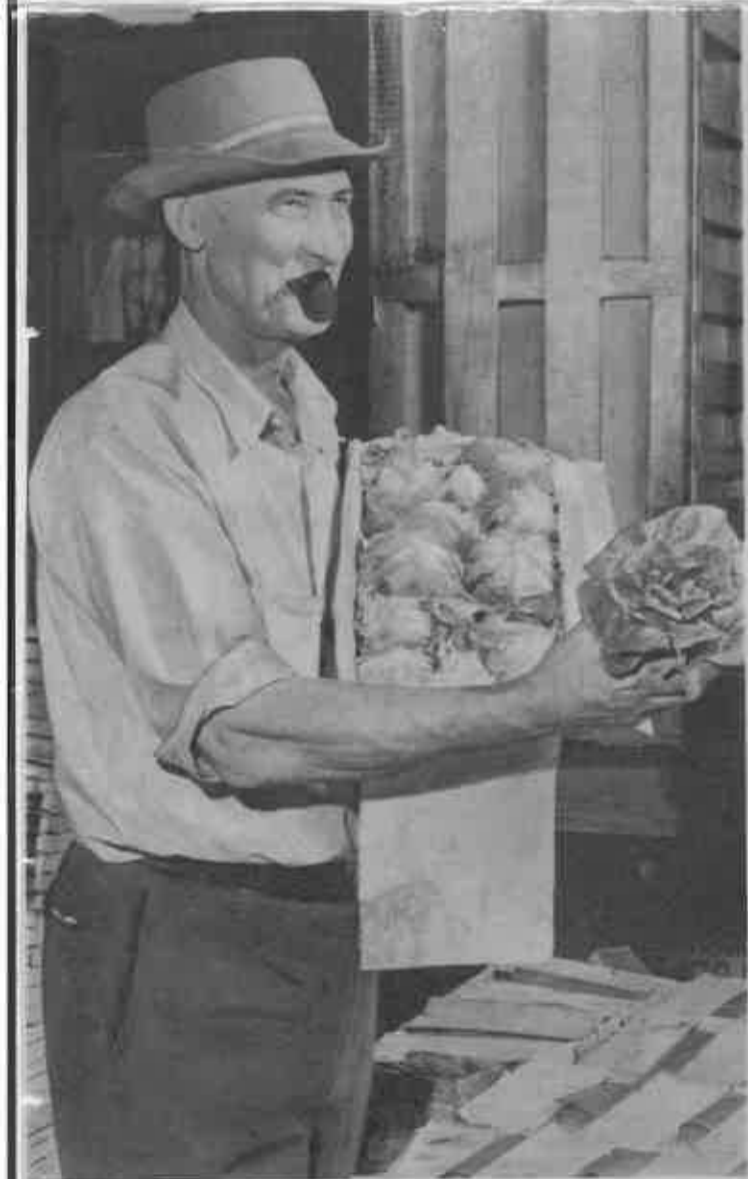
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Here's Gus Dreisbach, whose Jefferson Greenhouse Company at Lyndon is probably the greatest Bibb producer.



Seedlings planted 500 to the square foot are being thinned for transplanting at Genenwein's greenhouse.



Transplanted seedlings, 36 per square foot, are being thinned for a final transplanting, four per square foot.

Bibb for years here in Louisville, can tell you all about it. When the lettuce really caught on in earnest here and it seemed like an impossibility to lose money on it, they planted acres of the stuff down in the Rio Grande Valley. They cleared out a sizable barn to make room for the avalanche of money they just knew would come pouring in. And what happened? They had to drag all the old plows and horse collars and grindstones back into the barn and they were lucky they didn't lose their shirts.

The markets they had counted on didn't materialize. The lettuce wasn't well-enough known. They suffered tremendously in spoilage and, they realized too late, all Bibb lettuce isn't necessarily the delicacy we take for granted here in Kentucky. It can be tough and lacking in flavor.

**I**F WILLIAM GENENWEIN spies a sneaky Bibb lettuce plant rearing its sassy head in the Rio Grande Valley, he whips out his trusty hoe and decapitates same forthwith. You'd think it was a rattlesnake or maybe poison ivy. But he doesn't carry his grudge back to Louisville with him. Far from it. He handles the stuff lovingly and he ships from 500 to 600 baskets a week out of here in the wintertime. A basket holds 10 pounds, incidentally. Bibb lettuce brings about 50 cents a pound wholesale in winter—the peak price. It sells at 20 to 25 cents in spring and summer. Now do you begin to understand why some people refer to currency as lettuce?

Soil seems to be one factor of enormous importance in growing Bibb lettuce. The best-flavored happens also to be the best-looking Bibb and it takes limestone soil to produce it. It is a tricky question, really, but the successful growers all swear that top-quality Bibb lettuce cannot be grown except on limestone soils and that Kentucky limestone soils raise the very best lettuce. Soil scientists, armed with pH values, and trace-mineral elements might give them an argument but they'll never change their minds.

A similar point used to be argued in relation to whisky. Only limestone water, the old-fashioned distillers said, could produce high-grade bourbon whisky. And furthermore, they asserted, only Kentucky limestone water could produce the very best bourbon whisky. Other states with limestone water stoutly denied this. Kentucky distillers swore that other bourbons did O.K. for the first couple of years in the barrel. But then the real quality stuff began to show and Kentucky bourbon at 4 years had it over the other kinds like ice cream over pond-slime. The chemists backed up

Continued on Page 52



Big A

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Gerber's new Rice Cereals Agrees even with man allergic to other cereals!

Doctors wanted a l rice. And since it's ou foods babies like and fourth to Gerber's Barle

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What smell good? Ger tasty Baked Potato—our sp for Moms and Toddlers:

Cut a baked potato in h lengthwise. Remove insi and mash with butter margarine. Add salt. A half as much Gerber's J for Beef, Veal or Liver. I fill the potato shells with t mixture and bake in hot ov (400°) until brown. De ctions!

\* \* \*

The carriage trade. Get Baby's carriage up or down a can be a struggle when the wheels are too small. But avoid wheels, too. They make the





Mrs. Elizabeth Brown, left, and Mrs. Elizabeth Perry cut matured lettuce heads at Dreisbach's greenhouse.

## The Bibb lettuce know-how is concentrated hereabouts

### BIBB LETTUCE *Continued*

the pond-slime people and they produced innumerable graphs and charts and things to prove their point. But that old racial intuition took a hand and . . . well, you see where most of the whisky comes from, don't you?

Other places have tried Bibb lettuce as a crop and it may well work out in some of them. The Michigan growers seem to have a lot in their favor but so far they haven't seemed to master the art of cutting the head at just the right point. Their product cannot compete with the Kentucky growers' primarily because it isn't uniform and it isn't packed as well. Some Cincinnati growers also seem to be in the swim. But it is significant that Gus Dreisbach, whose Jefferson Greenhouse Company at Lyndon is probably the biggest of all Bibb producers, can almost invariably beat them right on their own home grounds. He can send his truckloads into their market and top off the cream.

Dreisbach believes that the real future of Bibb lettuce lies in the development of a better package. "With the right

kind of a package," he said, "there is absolutely no limit to our Bibb market. We have the world to sell to if we can supply it."

When a regular head of lettuce begins to look dragged and worn you can tear off the outer leaves and it looks pretty good again. But not so with Bibb. Handling Bibb lettuce is much like handling roses. And that isn't such an exaggeration, either. The leaves simply cannot stand being handled. They bruise and wilt and in a short time they are unsalable.

The most promising package Dreisbach has found so far is a ventilated, transparent bag that shows the lettuce off to advantage, retards wilting by several days and keeps the flavor perfectly intact. Lettuce shipped in such bags will be far less susceptible to damage by handling. In all probability the package will be paid for by the decrease in spoilage.

**T**HE costliest crop to produce, of course, is the winter crop grown under glass. And heating isn't the only large expense in this operation. Soil must be sterilized in large quantities and care must be exercised to prevent molding. When temperature and humidity are just right mold attacks the lettuce with bewildering speed and whole crops can be wrecked almost overnight.

There is more technical skill and general Bibb-lettuce know-how concentrated in and around Louisville than in the rest of the world combined. Our growers haven't any worries about competition. They are the pioneers in a very tricky field and they have solved most of their early problems. Newcomers will have to do it the hard way.

Gus Dreisbach nodded his head solemnly when he discussed such matters. He looked grave when problems were mentioned. And then, utterly unable to suppress the delight of a man who is riding a gravy train, his grin spread from ear to ear (or from here to there, roughly five acres, all under glass). "At 50 cents a pound wholesale," he says happily, "what in the world have we got to worry about?"

John R. Clowes is an old contributor to the *Magazine*, and one of his contributions was the story of Bibb lettuce of 11 years ago mentioned in the lead of the story. Since then, he has been in business for himself, lived a while in Florida, and is now back in Louisville, a member of our advertising department. When asked how he came to be such an authority on Bibb lettuce, he replied: "Oh, I just happened to write a story about it, and that makes me an expert." He is a brother of Molly Clowes (Mrs. James W. Walsh) of *The Courier-Journal* editorial staff.

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## Born in Kentucky

*Courier-Journal Magazine*, Mar. 22, 1964

WHENCE came Bibb lettuce?

You can find misguided folk who will try to convince a son of the Bluegrass State that there ain't no such thing as a Kentucky rifle—that it's really the Pennsylvania rifle. But no one yet has had the audacity to claim another state as the birthplace of Bibb lettuce.

And it's all because of a gentleman living in Frankfort in the 1800's. He was Jack Bibb, who had risen to a brigade major in the War of 1812 and was granted a lifetime pension by a grateful Government.

The military life, however, held no allure for him, and he preferred to be known as Mr. Jack Bibb. After practicing law for a time and serving quietly in the Kentucky Legislature, he moved to Frankfort from the family's holdings in Russellville, built the mansion Gray Gables at the corner of Wapping Street and Petticoat Lane, and lived the life of a rustic gentleman.

His principal interest, until he died at age 95, was experimenting with flowers and vegetables, both in his greenhouses and outside. The lettuce that came to bear his name was a perfection of the type that his family had grown in Russellville.

He began giving it away to his friends when he was past 80, and it was considered a mark of distinction for a Frankfort hostess to have some of "Mr. Jack's lettuce" on her menu.

The lettuce never was patented or protected in any way.

For the record, Jack Bibb was born in Virginia in 1789 and came to Kentucky with his family when just a boy. The family was prominent in the early history of the state. George, a brother of Jack, was United States senator from Kentucky and served as Treasury Secretary under President John Tyler.

## Thankful for Namesake

WITH BIBB LETTUCE an important part of today's menu, diners may be thankful that this namesake of old Maj. Jack Bibb is no longer a secret product. For



Mary L. Kelley has been visiting grandparents.

three decades the world has looked to Kentucky for this delicious lettuce, which only the Bibb family and friends enjoyed until that time.

Because Viola Genewein went to a friend's house for dinner one evening in 1919, when Bibb lettuce was served, the small delicate heads are now for public rather than private consumption. As her father was a professional truck gardener, she wanted some of the leaves, like those on the menu, for him. Her friend told her that it was a secret product grown on the estate of the man for whom he worked.

After finally acquiring a few of the seeds from a friend of a friend of the major's, Mr. Genewein produced a wonderful crop of the Bibb variety. In 1938 the family grew 25,000 pounds of it between Wilson and Algonquin Parkway from only a thimbleful of seeds.

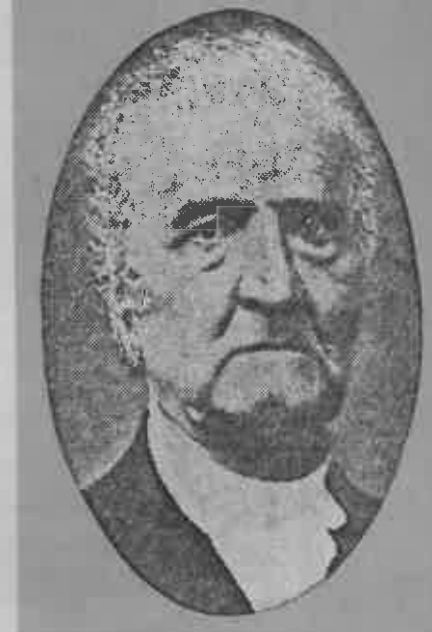
### Main Supply Here

John, or Jack Bibb, who cultivated the lettuce, was born in Virginia, and was still very young when his father moved to Russellville. He differed from the rest of his family, who were socially

and politically successful. His brother was Secretary of the Treasury under President Taylor.

A major in the expeditionary forces in the War of 1812, John Bibb dropped the title when the war was over. He loved to experiment with growing things, and was past 80 when he began giving his lettuce away. He moved to Frankfort in 1856 and built a beautiful home, Gray Gables, at the historic corner of Wapping and Watson Court, then known as Petticoat Lane.

The first batch of seed cultivated for marketing has now spread to far-away prices, though the world still looks to Kentucky for its main supply. The Geneweins' monopoly on the product was broken, so the story goes, when it was planted outdoors and people stole it. (It would be a temptation on a dark night.)



Maj. John (Jack) Bibb developed the lettuce that bears his name.

## Kentucky Native

# Mr. Bibb's Lettuce

By CAROL SUTTON  
The Courier-Journal Women's Editor

One of the world's great dining treats, Bibb lettuce—those flowerlike heads with their ruffled leaves and elegant flavor—was born in a greenhouse behind the 125-year-old mansion in Frankfort pictured at right. Jack Bibb, who fought in the War of 1812, represented Logan County in the Kentucky legislature and then retired, produced both the house, which he called "Gray Gables," and the lettuce, which he didn't give a name. Grateful neighbors and friends with whom he shared his lettuce referred to it as "Mr. Bibb's lettuce," and eventually this was shortened to Bibb lettuce. Bibb was a native of Virginia whose family settled in Russellville, Ky., when he was a small boy. In 1845 he moved to Frankfort, built "Gray Gables" and puttered in his greenhouse. He was in his 80s when he began handing out samples of the lettuce variety he developed in his greenhouse. After Bibb's death at the age of 95 in the mid-1880s, the house on Wapping Street and Petticoat Lane (now Watson Court) became the property of a niece, Mrs. Albert Burnley. The house remained in the family (the greenhouse is no longer there) until 1947 when it was purchased by its present owner, Minor Clark, Kentucky commissioner of fish and wildlife.



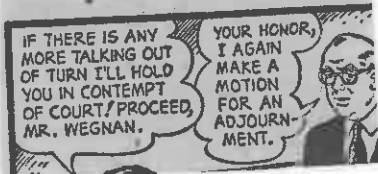
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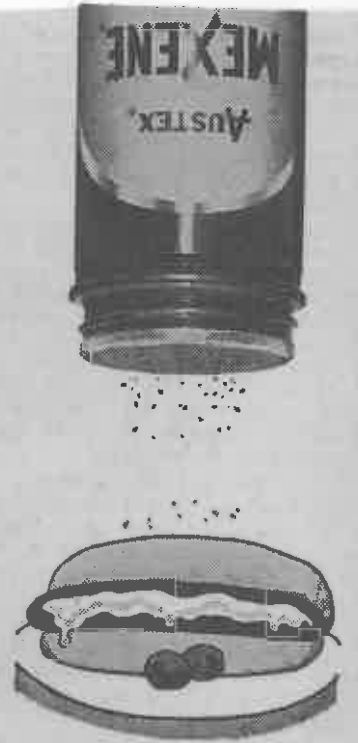
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By VIC GREEN



Luncheon given by the Marketing Executives of America, actor Dale Gribble, Model of the Year.



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30 April 1970

# The Courier-Journal





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STAFF SPECTACOLOR PHOTOS By BILL LUSTER

