

Mail Pouch Barns

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Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn how a national advertising campaign began in West Virginia.
- Participants will learn about Harley Warrick, the last of the barn painters.
- Participants will learn how these structures survived federal regulations.

We'll Pay You to Paint Your Barn

At the turn of the 20th century, brothers Aaron and Samuel Bloch needed a way to market their latest innovation, one in which they used the leftover pieces in the cigar manufacturing process and packaged the flavored strips in pouches so that miners could use tobacco in places where they were not allowed to smoke.



*Mail Pouch Barn located on Hwy 55 just north of Valley Head, WV. Photo by Jimmy Emerson, DVM
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/auvet/1056290744/in/gallery-68880587@N02-72157723118890319/>*

The brothers operated a dry goods store in Wheeling and later added a tobacco processing operation to the building. When a flood destroyed the first floor of the facility, the brothers decided to go all-in on the tobacco aspect of their business.

Mail Pouch got its name in a rather unique way. In a time before telephones and cars, the only way people communicated was through

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letters in the mail. The Bloch brothers operated a grocery store in the Wheeling area where people would gather around the counters and share the local gossip while they waited for the mailman's arrival. The mailman would not only deliver the letters, but also bring news from neighboring towns. The brothers decided to sponsor a contest to let the community name their new product, which they jokingly referred to as "West Virginia Cole Slaw." The mailman wrote down his suggestion and placed it in the jar with the other would-be names. The mailman's entry was pulled from the jar, and with that, Mail Pouch was born.



Harley E. Warrick painting barnside advertisements for Mail Pouch Tobacco of Wheeling, West Virginia. Photo by Courtesy Roger Warrick

They decided to hire a team of painters to travel the rural roads around Wheeling, West Virginia, and offer farmers between \$2 and \$20 to paint advertisements on the side of their barns to entice the public to start sampling Mail Pouch tobacco. Farmers jumped on the thought of having someone pay to handle that chore, and by the time the program ended in 1992, thousands of barns across the country featured the Mail Pouch tobacco logo: "Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco, Treat Yourself to the Best."

The painters were paid by the square footage of the barn, so they devised a system where they would place a black dot in the center of every foot in the outside yellow borders. A photo would be taken of the finished job and sent to the Bloch Brothers' offices to verify the team's work.

A team of two painters could typically finish a barn in half a day. At the start of the campaign, the teams worked 51 of the 52 weeks each year, getting only the week surrounding Christmas off.

The painters would occasionally return to these barns throughout the years, but only to touch up the advertisement. The entire barn would only be painted once in its lifetime. Some barn owners were given a yearly stipend for their participation. Instead of money, payment often came in the form of Mail Pouch tobacco or subscriptions to the Saturday Evening Post or Collier's, popular nationally distributed magazines at the time.

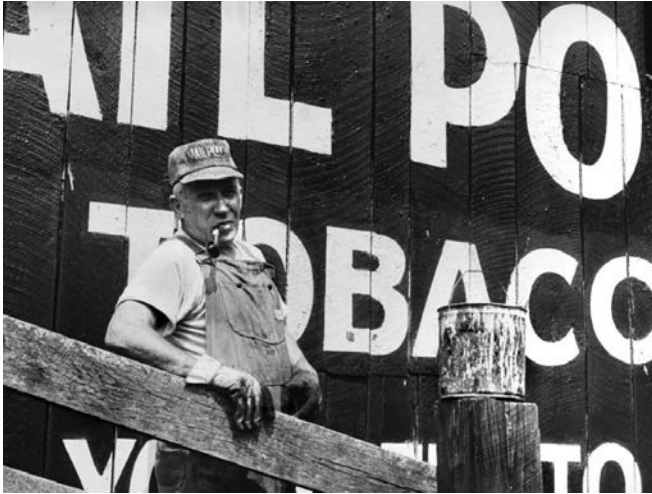
The Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company was sold to the General Cigar and Tobacco Company in 1969, and that company decided to end the barn-painting program. General Cigar and Tobacco was purchased by the Helme Tobacco Company in the 1980s. Swisher International, which took over Helme in 1986, still pays barn owners a rather modest \$10 per year for their barn use. The company, however, did continue the employment of Harley Warrick, considered the last of the Mail Pouch Barn painters, to touch up the paint on existing barns until his retirement in 1992.

Harley Warrick

Needing a job after returning home from military service following World War II, Harley Warrick was offered a chance to join the team of Mail Pouch Barn painters in 1946. The pay would be about \$32 per week. He figured it would be better than milking cows on the family farm. It turned out to be the only job he ever had.

He and a partner traveled from town to town, sometimes sleeping in the back of their truck. With his partner painting the black background and Warrick doing the lettering, they were able to paint a barn in about six hours. He painted the familiar logo on barns in nine states, ranging from Illinois to New York and Michigan to West Virginia. After retiring in 1992, he estimated that he had painted or retouched about 20,000 barns in his career. His work has been honored by the Smithsonian Institution and featured on





Harley E. Warrick Photo source Hagen History Center <https://www.eriehistory.org/blog/mail-pouch-barns-a-fading-american-icon>

television shows such as Good Morning America and On the Road with Charles Kuralt. Warrick once told an interviewer that the first 1,000 barns were tough, but that he “eventually got the hang of it.”

Warrick never used a template, preferring to just eye up his “canvas.” He said he would first paint the E in Chew, then add the H and the W. He said he liked doing it that way because it represented his initials HEW. Warrick also said he would paint his initials in out-of-sight places on the barn, such as under the barn’s roof or along the outside borders. Warrick said he would sometimes purposely misspell words just to see if people were paying attention, his most popular prank being to spell tobacco with three C’s.

He was married twice, his first wife giving him an ultimatum of choosing the job or her. He chose to continue painting signs on barns. When he remarried, he would only go away for one week at a time. He didn’t hang up his brushes after retiring in 1992 as he continued to craft Mail Pouch Barn birdfeeders and mailboxes that he sold at local shops in the Ohio Valley.

The barn painters had a rule that you were not supposed to touch the person while he was painting, or else the guilty party would have to buy a drink for the person who was touched.

Warrick admitted that on particularly hot days, he would find a way to get touched so that he could enjoy the refreshment.

Famed newscaster Ted Koppel even hired Warrick to paint a barn he owned with the Mail Pouch logo. Warrick painted a Moundsville barn with the iconic logo for the 1971 movie Fools’ Parade. While he was painting it, he met actor Jimmy Stewart. Warrick told Stewart that he had painted a sign on the side of Stewart’s father’s barn in Indiana, Pennsylvania.

Warrick’s last hurrah came in October 2000. Not fully retired, he retouched the logo on the barn located at Barkcamp State Park in Belmont County, Ohio, about a month prior to his death.

Warrick died in a Wheeling hospital at the age of 76. Upon his passing, a group of barn aficionados formed the “Mail Pouch Barnstormers” to promote and preserve the heritage of Warrick’s handiwork. The group holds an annual picnic in Warrick’s hometown of Belmont, Ohio, every summer.

Protected By Law

In 1965, Congress passed the Highway Beautification Act that prohibited billboards from being within 660 feet of any federally funded roadway to promote safety and preserve natural beauty. These federal regulations put a damper on the barn advertising campaign. However, in 1974, at the urging of U.S. Senator Jennings Randolph, D-W.Va., Mail Pouch Barns received an exemption from the restrictions as they were deemed “folk heritage barns.” The amendment to the bill officially designated these structures as historic landmarks, but only to those painted before 1970.

That would not be the last challenge Mail Pouch Barns would face. In the 1990s, as part of a settlement between tobacco companies and state claims related to health care costs attributed to smoking, all billboards promoting tobacco products were ordered to be taken down. But as the signs were coming down, the public rallied to protect the country’s Mail Pouch Barns.



West Virginia's attorney general's office at the time determined that the national settlement did not pertain to the barn signs, stating that even though the issue was never brought up in discussions, it was the feeling of the state's top lawyer that these barns were a part of Americana.

Though weathered and worn, these barns have stood the test of time, surviving the federal regulators and the anti-tobacco push. At its peak, Mail Pouch advertising was featured on more than 20,000 barns across the country. Today, approximately 2,000 are still standing.



Mail Pouch Barn located on Hwy 7 between Blacksville and Wana, WV.
Photo by Jimmy Emerson, DVM <https://www.flickr.com/photos/auvet/27380074412/in/gallery-68880587@N02-72157723118890319/>

Resources

- "Mail Pouch Barnstormers Keeping Art Heritage Alive." The Intelligencer. Wheeling, WV. August 16, 2015.
- "This Ol' Barn." *wvtourism.com*. July 24, 2020.
- "A Real American Idol Celebrates 100th: Mail Pouch." Jack Goddard. Milestones, Vol 32, No. 2. *bcpahistory.org*.
- "Last of the Barn Painters: Harley Warrick left his mark on rural America in Mail Pouch barn paintings." Fred Hendricks. *Farmcollector.com*. August 18, 2021.
- "We called ourselves barn massagers, walldogs or barn lizards." Dave Tabler. *Appalachianhistory.net*. September 24, 2019.
- "Mail Pouch Barns: The early outdoor advertising that started in West Virginia and grew into a national icon." *WV.gov*. August 20, 2020.
- "Mail Pouch Barns." The West Virginia Encyclopedia. October 8, 2010.
- "Mail Pouch Barns: A Fading American Icon." Jeff Sherry. Hagen History Center. July 16, 2021.

2024

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