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ELI BUCHANAN WITT

THE SOUTH’S MOST OUTSTANDING TOBACCO MERCHANT

By EARL J. BROWN
Vice President Emeritus
Havatampa Cigar Company

Eli Buchanan Witt, born at Gates, Tennessee, April 16, 1880, the son of Susie Lucas and Clayton H. Witt, attended public school in his home town and also attended Southwestern Baptist University, Jackson, Tennessee where he was a member of Sigma Nu Fraternity.

He moved to Tampa in 1898 and in April 1903 was married to Ida Coffee of Texas who on October 27, 1904, gave birth to his only child, Ida Witt, in Tampa. Ida Coffee Witt died October 29, two days after her daughter’s birth. She is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery. Mr. Witt and his daughter lived with his parents who provided a home for them giving
The baby the care that a young child needs. His daughter, now Ida Witt Eskridge, and her daughter, Edwina Witt Lovingood, both make their homes in Tampa today.

The South’s most outstanding tobacco merchant of the early 1900s, Eli Witt, who prior to opening his own business in downtown Tampa, had worked at a soda fountain on Franklin Street, had in 1902 secured a position as a commercial traveler (a traveling salesman) for American Tobacco Company and for R. J. Reynolds and had returned to Tampa in 1904 to work for his brother, C. B. Witt, who operated a wholesale grocery business. After following this line of work for several months Eli went into business on his own and opened his first retail cigar stand. This was early in 1905 and is considered to be the start of Eli Witt’s career in the retail cigar and tobacco business.

In the spring of 1905, Eli Witt purchased a cigar store, located at 505 Franklin Street, from D.A. Switzer who also operated a small cigar factory. Switzer manufactured a cigar brand, "Tampa Custom House", which was later to become a brand manufactured
WITT VISITS CUBA
When Eli Witt made his first visit to Cuba, from whence he got all the tobacco used in his products, he was interviewed by the Havana newspaper. This is a clipping of the story in the 1920s. The Witts are shown with J. J. Shapiro and Mrs. Ruth Murray- While there they were entertained by Mr. and Mrs. Karl Cuesta.

-From the HAV-A-TAMPA ELI WITT Collection by EARL BROWN

Mr. J. J. Shapiro, of New York, Mrs. Ruth Murray, of Atlanta, Ga., and Mr. and Mrs. Eli Witt, of Tampa, Fla., who were present on the veranda of the Jockey Club during the last week’s racing.

P. T. Jones. Fotograms, New York

Tampa Cigar Magnate Enjoy Havana Visit; Guest at Hotel Plaza

Although he is a veteran of the Spanish-American war, and president and principal stockholder of a firm which annually uses thousands of pounds of Cuban tobacco in the manufacture of cigars, Ell Witt, of Tampa, Fla., had never visited this country until a few days ago, when he and Mrs. Witt accompanied by Ira J. Shapiro, of New York city, and Mrs. Ruth Murray, arrived here to be the guest of Fausto Simon at the Hotel Plaza.

The career of Mr. Witt reads like a tale from the pen of Horatio Alger. At the outbreak of the Spanish-American war, when Mr. Witt was 18 he entered the United States army and was sent to Tampa, where he was stationed during the war.

When the war was over Mr. Witt decided to remain in Tampa. He saw that city as a logical center for the establishment of a tobacco business. His first venture was a small retail cigar store, the daily turn-over in which was less than $7, and from that small beginning has grown one of the largest concerns of its kind in the south. For today the firm manufactures and sells through its own distributors and stores, more than 180,000,000 cigars a year.

Mr. Witt’s company operates 60 distributing plants, stretching from, the middle west to the Atlantic sea. board. Aside from the cigars which he manufactures under the trade name of Havatampa, Mr. Witt also is a large distributor of cigarettes, pipes, tobacco and smokers’ articles. His company is the largest distributor of cigars in the south and the second largest distributor of cigarettes in the United States, the annual business exceeding $18,000,000.

Mr. Witt is greatly impressed with Havana and marvels at its beauty and modern aspects. He is conferring with leading tobacco men of Havana concerning the establishment of a branch in this city.

Yesterday afternoon Mr. Witt and his party were the guests of Mr. and Mrs. Karl Cuesta at the Havana-American Jockey club, and afterwards were taken by Mr. Cuesta to the Havana Country club for tea. In the evening Mr. and Mrs. Cuesta were hosts to the party at a dinner at the Reguladora restaurant. rendezvous of every Cuban and visiting tobacco man when in Havana.

Mr. Witt and his party will return to Florida tonight, but they have announced their determination to again visit Havana at an early date and for a longer stay.
by the Havatampa Cigar Company. The cigar store sold by Switzer to Eli Witt was the "Hole-in-the-Wall" so named because of its size and shape, being 9 feet wide and 30 feet deep. The young clerk operating this cigar store for Switzer was a very promising one by the name of Gillie Trezevant. Eli Witt made the statement that one of the reasons he bought the "Hole-in-the-Wall" was that he wanted Gillie to work for him as he was a very bright young man. After purchasing this store it was identified by a sign hanging over the sidewalk with light bulbs spelling the name "E L I" and as other cigar stores were opened by Eli Witt similar signs were installed.

"MR. ELI"

It was not too long before Eli Witt became known as "MR. ELI". In 1906 Mr. Eli was connected in business with Garrett W. Judy doing business under the combined names of "Witt and Judy" at three locations: 505 Franklin Street (The Hole-in-the-Wall), 704 Franklin Street, and Court Square Pharmacy at 412 Franklin Street. This association existed for about a year. However, Mr. Eli continued to operate his business at the Hole-in-the-Wall and the cigar stand in the drug store. A new employee, W. L. (Bill) Van Dyke, began working for Mr. Eli in 1907. Soon after, Van Dyke's twin brother, Jessie, was likewise employed. Jessie was assigned to work at the cigar stand in the drug store while Bill and Gillie assisted Mr. Eli in the operation of the Hole-in-the-Wall. Soon after his employment by Mr. Eli, Jessie met a very untimely death by drowning in Tampa Bay.

BUSINESS EXPANDS

By 1908 Mr. Eli had begun to do some wholesale business from the Hole-in-the-Wall...
and during 1908-1909 had his landlord expand the building, first by 30 feet and finally by another 30 feet making the building 9 feet by 90 feet - a shape aptly described by its name. Mr. Eli’s retail cigar store occupied the front 30 feet; Badger Wilder, a tobacco broker, the next 30 feet, and Mr. Eli’s wholesale business the remaining 30 feet. He and his young associates, Van Dyke and Trezevant worked hard and built their volume to $10,000 per month. In Mr. Eli’s words, "The business was going good," when he was shocked by Gillie Trezevant telling him that he did not see any future in Mr. Eli’s business and that he was accepting a job at the First National Bank. It was at that point that Mr. Eli vowed he would make a future out of his business.

By late 1908, Mr. Eli’s business was known as Eli B. Witt Cigars & Tobacco. He had also joined in a venture with Badger Wilder known as Witt & Wilder, a billiard parlor at 207 Twiggs Street. By 1909 a number of business locations had been added and a list of Mr. Eli’s stores showed them at: 505 Franklin Street - 315 Zack Street - 211 Twiggs Street - 406 Franklin Street - DeSoto Hotel - Tampa Bay Hotel - Witt & Wilder Billiards - 207 Twiggs Street. 

'BANANA HOUSE'

This was the "Banana House " located at the south end of Tampa Street at 107 Whiting Street. The building was torn down in order to extend Tampa Street southward to Platt Street.

-From the HAV-A-TAMPA ELI WITT Collection by EARL BROWN
His brother, C. B. Witt, was instrumental in giving Mr. Eli his start as he financed him from the beginning and continued helping him for some time. The business needed a temporary bookkeeper so C. B. Witt told Mr. Eli he would ask his friend, who was President of the Business College, to send someone over. In May of 1910 a young man by the name of D. H. Woodbery began working for Mr. Eli as a temporary employee. (He stayed on and became President of the company at Mr. Eli’s death in 1947.)

The business was doing about $30,000 per month from its location, the Hole-in-the-Wall, at 505 Franklin Street in Tampa and it continued to grow. Badger Wilder had moved out and left all of the space at the Hole-in-the-Wall to Mr. Eli. C. B. Witt did not like the plan of operating the retail business and the wholesale business from the same location and tried to get Mr. Eli to separate the two. Mr. Eli and the young men working with him did not want to move as they liked to be in the center of town where there was lots of activity. However, Mr. Eli had to go to a higher altitude for his health about this time, 1911 or 1912, and decided to go to Asheville, N.C. He had not been away for long when C. B. Witt told Van Dyke and Woodbery that
they were to move the wholesale end of the business. Mr. Eli’s father, Clayton H. Witt, operated a banana warehouse at 107 Whiting Street, about six or eight blocks south of the Hole-in-the-Wall. This building was very close to the river and thus very convenient to the docks where schooner loads of bananas were brought in. The warehouse was also on a railroad siding. As the banana business had about played out, C. B. Witt decided to move Mr. Eli’s wholesale business to that location sometime during the year of 1912. The Hole-in-the-Wall continued to operate as a retail store at the original location.

ILL MOST OF HIS LIFE

On July 6, 1914, Mr. Eli married Wilma Lucille (known as "Billie") de Mandel 6 from Denver, Colorado, a very personable lady with good business judgement and whose opinions Mr. Eli respected highly. It was known that Mr. Eli counseled with her frequently on business decisions and that she assisted him by writing letters for him at times when he was ill. It was her decision that D. H. Woodbery would succeed Mr. Eli as President of the company at his death. Mr. Eli was ill most of his life, even during the time he was founding and building this business. From 1905 or 1906 he was plagued with illnesses of various sorts.

The company had created a good business on several brands of cigars, the, backbone of the business in those days, and had secured an exclusive arrangement on some of these brands. Among the controlled brands were, El Principe De Gales, La Preferencia, Cuesta-Rey, Tampa Custom House, Morey & Ponce, Jose Villa, La Fama Universal, Portinas and El Toros. There were, of course, other good selling brands in their inventory as well. Mr. Eli had two salesmen working in the city and one who worked the country territory including Lakeland, Kissimmee, Orlando, St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Bartow, Arcadia, Fort Myers, Bradenton, Palmetto, and Sarasota. This was a widespread area and the salesmen could not get around often to these towns. The C. B. Witt Company travelled eight or ten salesmen and they also sold the above brands which they secured from Mr. Eli at his cost price. They helped generate a good volume on these controlled brands. C. B. Witt became ill and went to Asheville for his health, but not noticing any improvement he went to Saranac Lake, New York where his illness worsened. He died there in 1914.
PRESSURE OF OLD DEBT

Mr. Eli owed his brother about $65,000 at his death and with his brother’s consent was paying it off at a rate of $1,000 per month. C. B. Witt's widow, Vannye, and his partner in the wholesale grocery business, N. M. McLeran, did not extend to Mr. Eli the generosity that he had received from his brother. They put pressure on him to pay off his debt and would not allow Mr. Eli money to further expand or develop his wholesale business.

An ex-P. Lorillard Co. salesman, George Harris, to quote Mr. Eli, "took up loafing around the Eli Witt warehouse" with a friend from his home town of Montgomery, Alabama. George had a Model T Ford and Mr. Eli thought it would be a good idea to send George and his friend to Bradenton and Palmetto to sell cigars. He loaded his car down and sent him on this 35 mile trip. They were back the next night all sold out. They made this trip a number of times until George’s car could not make it. At this point they wanted to buy a truck for George to use on this trip but McLeran had made it so they could not draw money out of the business. Not to be defeated, Mr. Eli, Van Dyke, Woodbery and George Harris pooled their personal funds and bought a Ford truck at a cost of about $550. They painted it up with signs, "Eli Witt Cigars", loaded it with cigars from the wholesale house, and George returned to Bradenton selling the cigars for cash as he made deliveries. He returned with an empty truck but with cash to help pay some of the
bills which were pressing. This is thought to be the first cash truck operation in the cigar and tobacco business in the United States. McLeran was "burnt up" when he heard that Mr. Eli had bought the truck even though a search of the books revealed that no company money had been used for this venture. This was a very profitable trip with sales of about $1,000 on each trip. A little later a larger truck replaced the Ford. Then another truck and another territory were added. Trucks with signs, "Eli Witt Cigars" or with "Eli Witt, Cigars - That's My Business" were becoming prominent throughout the area. The business continued to grow.

CHANGE OF NAME

RARE LABEL

Eli Witt once produced a cigar saluting the Tampa Times. This was the colorful inside box display label.

--From the HAV-A-TAMPA ELI WITT Collection by EARL BROWN
The name was changed from "Eli Witt Cigars" to Eli Witt Cigar Company. The amount owed to the C. B. Witt Company was now about $60,000 which Mr. Eli wanted so badly to pay off. He told Woodbery and Van Dyke that if they would help him by working hard and saving money for the company that he would give them a substantial share of the stock in the business when this debt was paid. Instead of it taking five years to pay off this debt, as it was originally planned, it was paid in less than half that time. To quote Mr. Eli, "I think all of the hardships which we had in those days helped to make the Eli Witt Cigar Company and the Havatampa Cigar Company what they are today. We all came up the hard way - it was shirt tails for us all the way up." Mr. Eli lived up to his word in dividing the ownership of the business, 20% each for Woodbery and Van Dyke and 60% for himself. In 1916, officers of the Eli Witt Cigar Company were Eli B. Witt, President, W. L. Van Dyke, Vice President, and D. H. Woodbery, Secretary-Treasurer.

It will be noticed that the name, "Havatampa" has not yet come into the picture and we will have to revert to another beginning to bring it into focus. In the early years of the cigar business in Tampa there were many cigar-makers in opening cigar factories. A cigar factory was considered to be a factory even if it had only one cigar-maker. The cigar box factories would think up a brand name, draw up a label for it and register it with "The Tobacco Leaf Publishing Co.", or some other appropriate organization, in order to own exclusive rights for its use. One such name, drawn up by the Tampa Box Company was "La Havatampa", registered on August 25th, 1902 by Roland A Wilson, one of the principals of the box company. The box factory would print up a supply of labels of each name it registered and allow the cigar manufacturer to select a name he would like to use. In return, the manufacturer would agree to buy his boxes from that factory.

**LABEL TRANSFERRED**

On November 3, 1902, Tampa Box Company agreed to give Jose Hilgers, a cigar manufacturer, the exclusive use of the name, “La Havatampa” for two years if he “ordered and paid for” 10,000 boxes and labels. They also agreed to transfer all rights to the label when he had done this. Evidently, Hilgers did not accomplish this in two years as the name was not transferred to him until March 13, 1906. About one year later, on March 30, 1907, the name was transferred by Hilgers to Havatampa Cigar Company, Krause Bros. (Propt.).” On this same date a bill of sale was issued by Hilgers selling his entire claim in the Havatampa Cigar Co., “tobacco, boxes and everything belonging to the factory for the sum of $520.00”, to Henry and Fred Krause of Tampa. The sill of sale was signed by Jose Hilgers and J. Henry Krause and was witnessed by Joe Verdyck.

A letterhead of Krause Bros. Manufacturers, factory no. 174, Tampa, Fla., carries the wording, "Clear Havana Cigars, No Salesmen - No Agents, Shipped Direct from Factory to Consumer". It also carries a photo of an open box of Havatampa cigars showing the Havatampa label on which a man is pictured. This is thought to be the first Havatampa label. This letterhead bears no date except the three numbers "190-". It is assumed the last number would be filled in when the month and day was typed on the letterhead. Krause Bros. registered the name Tampa Nugget on October 23, 1906, and as they began operating the Havatampa Cigar Co. in 1907, it is assumed the letterhead would have been used during the latter part of 1906 and/or early 1907.
MILLIONS OF CIGARS

A document in hand shows a partnership formed two days after the sale of the Havatampa Cigar Co. by Hilgers to J. Henry Krause on April 1, 1907 with J. H. Krause, Joe Verdyck and F. W. Krause as partners. Another shows a U. S. Internal Revenue Collector’s Certificate to manufacture cigars in the name of Havatampa Cigar Company dated April 3, 1907. It is estimated that approximately six million cigars were sold by the Havatampa Cigar Company during the period 1902-1916.

We now return to Eli Witt and the wholesale-retail business. The Eli Witt organization had developed a very good cigar business as already pointed out. This business was so good on some brands of cigars that some manufacturers began to sell their cigars to other distributors thereby cutting into Mr. Eli’s sales. This is what made him decide that he would have to own a brand of cigars or own a cigar factory so that he would be assured that the brand or brands could not be taken away from him when they began to sell. The Havatampa Cigar Co. at this time was making primarily Tampa Nugget cigars, this brand being owned by the Krause Bros. as pointed out earlier. They had created some demand in the area for Tampa Nuggets through their local jobber who was not very strong and who soon went out of business. At this time Mr. Eli contacted Fred Krause, who was the head of the partnership doing business as the Havatampa Cigar Company and told him that the Eli Witt Cigar Company would like to handle his cigars. The Havatampa Cigar Company which was located in the home of Fred Krause at the corner of Nebraska and Henry Avenues near Sulphur Springs was making about 3,000 Tampa Nuggets per day at the time - probably late 1916. After a short time (1917) the Eli Witt Cigar Company entered into a contract with the partnership to take their entire output for all time to come. Because Mr. Eli knew that he was not in position to finance a factory of his own and feeling that if he could gain the control of this factory by agreeing to take the complete output, that would be the next best thing to owning a factory. The contract specified that the Eli Witt Cigar Company would sell a minimum of 10,000 cigars per day, or 60,000 per week and as long as the company did that it would retain control of the complete output. Mr. Eli had three months to build up to this volume with Tampa Nuggets being the big number.

MOVE TO YBOR CITY

Things went very well for awhile. In April, 1917, Krause moved the factory to Ybor City to larger quarters at 2302 14th Street and made more cigars. Mr. Eli had to put out more effort to continue to sell the complete output. It was agreed that Krause would give Mr. Eli a copy of all orders received and Mr. Eli would give Krause a copy of all letters he wrote. Mr. Eli was acquainted with many jobbers and retailers throughout the south and began writing to them about Tampa Nugget cigars. The area close around in Florida was taking about all the cigars it could and Mr. Eli had to expand the sales area. He hit the road through the southern states and established a good Tampa Nugget business, but production was growing constantly and the cigars had to be sold. It was late 1917 and Krause had again moved the factory to larger quarters at 2411-21st Street. Krause wanted to get out of the agreement and realized that if Mr. Eli could not sell all the cigars Krause could make, the contract would be void. Mr. Eli had again been ill and had to go to Colorado for his health. When he heard from Tampa telling him they were not selling enough cigars to hold the contract, he got out of bed and went to work selling Tampa Nuggets in Colorado.
Sales in Colorado, plus those in the southern states and in Tampa made a sufficient total to hold the contract. While Mr. Eli was in Colorado, just before returning to Tampa, he received word that Fred Krause had died. After he returned to Tampa it was announced that Henry Krause was in bad health and wanted to sell the business.

This was the opportunity of a lifetime for Mr. Eli - a chance to own his own cigar factory - but money was the problem. Henry Krause and Joe Verdyck, the remaining partners, wanted $12,200 for the business. The Eli Witt Cigar Co. could raise $8,000 but that was all. Mr. Eli tried to borrow money, from the bank, from business people, from friends, from anybody, but it seemed futile. He had all but given up hope when Woodbery and Van Dyke told him they thought that they along with several of their relatives and with Joe Verdyck included could raise the additional $4,200 to complete the deal. This was in May or June 1917 and from this point on the Eli Witt Cigar Company and the Havatampa Cigar Company began to operate as one company. The ownership of both companies remained in the same proportions as in Eli Witt Cigar Company. A royalty contract was entered into in order to compensate those persons who provided the $4,200 necessary to complete the purchase of Havatampa Cigar Co. from J. H. Krause and Joe Verdyck.

By this time in 1917, the Eli Witt Cigar Company was staffed by Eli Witt, President, W. L. Van Dyke, Vice President, and D. H. Woodbery, Secretary-Treasurer with stores located at 505 Franklin Street and 315 Zack Street. The wholesale business and offices were at the "Old Banana House" at 107 Whiting Street. The Havatampa Cigar Company continued to operate at the 2411-21st Street address in 1919 with the management being the same as Eli Witt Cigar Co. but with the additional name of T. W. McElvy, Manager. McElvy was one of Woodbery's relatives who contributed money to buy the cigar business from the Krause Brothers. Mr. Eli told Woodbery that in view of the fact that he had been raised on a farm in Gadsden County, Florida, where tobacco was grown, he would have to assume the responsibility of the cigar factory. The company was affected by a strike of all cigar makers in Ybor City and arranged to have its brands made by the Dade City Cigar Co. in Dade City, Florida. This supplier found it necessary to add more employees and began training new cigar makers. Many came from other rural areas close by and many from south Georgia.

In July 1920 the Havatampa Cigar Company began operating in a much larger plant at 2007-21st Street in Ybor City having moved from its previous location four blocks north at 2411-21st Street. This move proved to be a permanent one and as the Home of Hav-A-Tampa cigars for 52 years until it moved, in 1972, into its new manufacturing facility and corporate headquarters at 500 Faulkenburg Road, Tampa.

Together these two companies grew and expanded to become one of the largest wholesale distributors and cigar manufacturers in the United States. During the years from 1917 to 1962 many companies were acquired and many new ones formed. Administration of the company had become complicated to the point that it was deemed advisable to merge all entities into one - with this merger the Havatampa Cigar Corporation was formed November 1, 1962.

Several changes in management and ownership of the company were made after the death of D. H. Woodbery on March 16, 1973. In 1977 the company was sold to an out of town group, the HAV Corporation. On December 1, 1978 the cigar manufacturing business was sold to a group of local investors.
most of whom were already employed in that division of the company. The name "Havatampa Incorporated" was taken by the cigar manufacturing firm and the wholesale distribution firm now operates under the name of "The Eli Witt Company". Havatampa Incorporated is building a new cigar manufacturing facility in Sabal Park east of Highway 301 just south of Buffalo Avenue and is expected to occupy same by the end of 1981.

A biographical sketch of Eli Witt was published in Men of the South, a work for the newspaper reference library, in 1922. The Tampan was described thusly:

"... Eli Witt is a striking example of the result of personality plus hard work achieving business success. He is well-liked everywhere he is known and has always the "glad hand' and the encouraging word for everyone with whom he comes in contact. His retail places in Tampa are headquarters for those interested in current events of interest throughout the country and one, the 'Horse Shoe', on Franklin Street, is the center of the sporting and amusement activities of the city. Mr. Witt has also been fortunate in surrounding himself with able associates and assistants. He is an aggressive and original advertiser and his name is well known in cigar and tobacco circles everywhere ..."

**FOOTNOTES**

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¹ Susie Lucas Witt  
² Clayton H. Witt  
³ 1da Coffee Witt  
⁴ Eli B. Witt  
⁵ Currie B. Witt  
⁶ Wilma de Mandel Witt  
⁷ Vanny C. Witt