

MY MEMORIES OF CHATHAM COUNTY TOBACCO 1948 TO 1952

By Bill Sharpe ~ September 2020*

Tobacco farming after World War II was basically unchanged since the late 1800s. The growing economy and emphasis on efficiency led to a shift to mechanization during the 1950s and 60s. 'Flue cured' tobacco means the individual leaves are harvested, tied onto sticks, and heated inside a barn. 'Burley' tobacco means the ripe tobacco plants are cut off at their base and hung in a barn to dry in air. Flue cured is predominant in North Carolina, and Burley is in Kentucky.

An outstanding 170-page Masters of Science thesis by Clayton Johnson titled "Put That in Your Pipe and Smoke It" presents the history of flue-curing tobacco barns and encourages their preservation.⁽¹⁾ The following is a description of tobacco farming in the post-WWII time period based on my experiences and augmented by his thesis.

The Bennetts

My Chatham County homeplace was on an ungraded dirt road that is now Polks Landing Rd running west from US 15-501. Mr. Gordon Bennett and his wife lived on the other side of the highway. He owned property on our side where he had a field of tobacco at the edge of the dirt road. He was a tall sturdy man who wore bib overalls, a long sleeve shirt, and a pith helmet during the summer. He moved slowly and steadily behind his mule as he prepared the land and cultivated his tobacco.

His wife, Miss Mamie, was small, thin, moved quickly, and died before him. Soon after, Mr. Gordon became interested in an attractive widow who worked at UNC and drove by every morning at the same time. He would stand out at the well by the road, crank up a bucket of water on the log roller, and wait for her to pass and wave. If she didn't arrive soon, he didn't want to look so obvious and would pour out the water and draw another bucket. They eventually married, but not until he installed running water and a bathroom.

His spinster sister, Miss Beulah Bennett, lived across our dirt road in a house on his property that was probably built in the 1800s. There was a building for living quarters and a separate one for the kitchen with a well in between. Mr. Gordon's tobacco barn was on the property, far from the house and the road.

Planting

Tobacco was grown the same way as tomatoes and similar plants. Tobacco seedlings were grown on 'new ground', a cleared area free of insects in the woods. The seedbed was covered with thin cotton cloth to keep it warm until the seeds sprouted and grew to about six inches long. That took place in the early spring so that the seedlings would be ready for transplanting by late May or June. They were planted as shown in Figure 1.

The planter was a cone-shaped container for water with a pointed jaw at the bottom. A smaller chute through which a seedling was dropped was attached to the side. The planter would be poked into the ground and the jaw opened by a handle at the top which released some water. A seedling was dropped down, the planter was lifted, and the farmer put his foot down beside the plant to secure it.

You can imagine my excitement when I was hired, at age 10, to drop seedlings as he planted. The pay was 25 cents an hour – my first earned money. We would start at seven in the morning and work, with only a short break for lunch, till the middle of the afternoon when it got very hot.

Cultivation

As the plants grew, it was necessary to prevent weeds from outgrowing them. This was accomplished by cutting off young weeds with a hoe – called ‘chopping’ or ‘hoeing’. One could do this at a slow walk, but it was still laborious. One expression to describe a good farmer after a long life was, “He hoed till the end of the row.” Tobacco did not require as much of this because the young plants had broad leaves, unlike cotton or corn. I don’t recall doing this for Mr. Gordon, but I did it in the cornfield of my 4-H project.



Figure 2. Tobacco bloom



Figure 1. Planting tobacco

Once the plants were 3 or 4 feet high, they begin to bloom at the top. The blooms needed to be cut off to force the plant to use its nutrients to grow larger and more uniform leaves. One would walk down between two rows and pinch off the tops on either side. It would cause the plant to generate some secondary leaves around its base, called suckers. They also had to be removed by hand. I did both after the first summer for Mr. Gordon with a pay increase to 50 cents an hour. ‘Topping’ was easy because you could do it about as fast as you could walk. ‘Suckering’ was awful because you had to bend over, the high plants shielded you from any breeze, and it was later in the summer. I certainly earned my pay.

The worst job for me was picking off tobacco worms. This occurred later, and hotter, in the summer. One would walk down the rows of plants that were now shoulder high and pick off the worms and step on them. This had to be done a couple of times, and by the end of the summer I was actually afraid of the big ones.

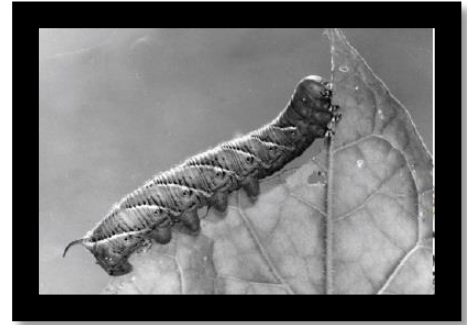


Figure 3. Tobacco worm

Harvesting

Harvesting tobacco began in early August. Some schools delayed opening until mid-September so that children could help with it. Figure 4 shows how the first step, called 'priming', was done. The mule pulls a narrow sled with cloth sides between the rows. The two men pick off the ripe tobacco leaves, starting at the bottom, and placing them in the sled. This is hard work; they have to continually bend down and straighten up in the summer heat. Mr. Gordon allowed me to do that when I was older, 13 and 14, and paid me, as I recall, \$2 an hour.



Figure 4. Priming tobacco

The tobacco sled was pulled up under the huge old oak trees around Miss Beulah's house. There the leaves were tied onto sticks that were later hung up in the tobacco barn for curing.



Figure 5. Stringing tobacco

The barefoot young woman here is the 'stringer'. A tobacco stick would be placed on the 'horse'. She would be handed three tobacco leaves (hands) held by their stems, wrap string around them and place them on one side of the stick and then place the next hand on the other side of the stick. A good stringer was very fast and required two 'handers.' In my second year with Mr. Gordon, I spent part of my time 'handing' tobacco – a rather pleasant low-energy job in the shade of the big oak trees.

There continues to be a contest at the NC State fair for the fastest stringer.⁽²⁾



Figure 6. Preparing tobacco for curing

Figure 6 is a busy picture of an entire operation on a large tobacco farm. The tobacco from the field is in a narrow wagon with cloth sides and wooden wheels. Those were used in the sandy soil further east; sleds with wooden runners were used in our area. The stringing operation is shown at the left with a lot of people gathered around for the photograph. The 'horse' with a strung stick of tobacco on it is at the front; there appear to be other stations behind it. The little girl in the middle of the picture may very well be 'handing' tobacco. Near the middle of the picture, one worker is placing a stick of tobacco in a rack where it awaits transport to the barn at the back.

Curing

Mr. Bennett's tobacco barn, and others around, was similar to the one shown below which is in the Heritage Farm Park of the Silk Hope Ruritan Club.



The barn is built of logs and the gaps between logs are packed with clay to make it airtight. There were two homemade wood-fired furnaces inside. Their entrances are shown under the shed; they are the dark areas near the ground. Long pieces of wood were pushed in from the outside to fuel the fire.



Figure 7. A typical furnace inside an abandoned barn



Figure 8. Hanging tobacco in the barn

The sticks of tobacco were hung between horizontal poles inside the barn. This picture shows four men hanging tobacco on six levels of poles. The one at the bottom hands a stick of tobacco to the first man who is straddling the poles. He passes it up to the third man who either puts it across his poles or passes it on up to the fourth man. They go up and down and back across the poles until they are filled. This is very hot work inside the closed barn.

The function of curing is to remove moisture from the leaf and starve the surplus food stored up during its growth. This would occur naturally over many days, but flue curing speeded up and controlled the process. Ideally, the temperature would be gradually raised to 110F, held there until the leaf yellowed, and then raised to 135F and up to 160F to complete the drying out process. This

was quite an art peculiar to each barn and was controlled by observing a thermometer hanging on the lower tier, observing the color of the leaves, and varying the heat coming from the wood-fired furnaces.

Grading

The cured tobacco was taken from the barn and stripped off the sticks. The individual tobacco leaves were then graded according to their color, size, freeness of defects, etc. The various grades were then placed on large flat shallow baskets for transport to market. Grading is described in the following:⁽³⁾

Tobacco was prized for its size and color. Some of the grades were: Bright Leaf, Big red, and "trash." The workers would pile the leaves up, dispose of the stalks in one pile and the sticks in another. The sticks would be used again for tobacco cutting, and the stalks would be returned to the field as organic matter. A tobacco basket, which was a large (about 4 foot by 4 foot), shallow one, made of wide slats, would be placed on the ground. When enough of one kind of tobacco leaf was collected, the worker would create what was called a "hand." The hand was several leaves (what you could hold in your hand), bunched together by the stems, wrapped in another leaf to hold the hand together, the end of the wrapping leaf tucked back inside the hand to protect it. The hand would then be laid in the tobacco basket, stems facing out, allowing the leaves to be protected during transit. The hands would cover the basket and be stacked up about four feet tall. When filled, the basket, filled with only one grade, would be loaded on the back of a trailer or truck to make the trip to the warehouse where it would be auctioned off.

The woman on the right is deciding the grade of the leaves she is holding. The one in the middle is tying up a 'hand', and the man is taking them to a basket.

Mr. Gordon graded and stored his in an abandoned store right across the road from my home. Figure 10 by Dorothea Lange shows it. I remember the 666 sign, and I remember shooting at a window on the other side with my double barrel BB gun. Much to my surprise, it broke the window, and I ran home and hid the gun.



Figure 9. Grading tobacco



Figure 10. Two Chatham County farm workers in 1939

Dorothea Lange was an accomplished photographer who was commissioned by the federal government in the late 1930s to travel around the country and take pictures of people. In the summer 1939, she left Chapel Hill in the company of a UNC social worker and traveled down 15-501 to Pittsboro. The picture in Figure 10 is labeled '*Highway 15, about two miles south of Orange County*' which placed it exactly at my home place. Her pictures taken in Pittsboro on a Saturday afternoon are enchanting

Marketing



Figure 11. A tobacco market

Figure 11 tells the whole story. The farmers have laid out their flats of tobacco according to grade. The buyers move down the line while somewhere in the middle the auctioneer chants in a rapid singsong voice until the flat is sold.

The farmer was paid in cash which may have been his entire monetary income for the year. He had to pay off any advances that had made been made for seed, fertilizer, and labor. The rest went to clothes and other provisions for the family. There were good years and bad years of course. One elderly neighbor told me that her family bought a small farm nearby when she was a teenager. They made enough money from tobacco in a very good first year to pay for the farm.

Epilogue

A taste of tobacco farming was enough to encourage me to go to college. I had no idea I would stay there the rest of my professional life.

References

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- (2) Search Web: 'Tobacco Stringing Contest NC State Fair'
- (3) <https://drbrop.wordpress.com/2012/11/16/grading-tobacco>

Figures Citations

Figure 1. <https://www.pinterest.com/poohi/the-history-of-tobacco-farmers-in-north-carolina/>

Figure 2. <https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/north-carolina/tobacco-historic-photos-nc/>

Figure 3. (1) Figure 4.7

Figure 4. <https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/north-carolina/tobacco-historic-photos-nc/>

Figure 5. <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/tobacco-farming-old-way>

Figure 6. <https://www.ncpedia.org/barns>

Figure 7. (1), Figure 5.4.

Figure 8. <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/tobacco-farming-old-way>

Figure 9. <https://drbrop.wordpress.com/2012/11/16/grading-tobacco>

Figure 10.

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Figure 11. <https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/north-carolina/tobacco-historic-photos-nc/>

** Bill Sharpe grew up in Chatham County, just up the road from where he now lives in Galloway Ridge. He left Chatham in 1961 and had a career as a Mechanical Engineering professor, but returned in 2010. He is currently pursuing his interests in local history and genealogy. CCHA is grateful to be the beneficiary of some of his local history research and memories.*