

THE FIELDS OF TOBACCO

By John F. Hall

It has been many years since tobacco was raised on the widow woman's farm. Before I tell how I raised tobacco on this farm, I will reach back into history and write a little bit



about the Tobacco War of 1780-1781. During the American Revolutionary War in Virginia, General Benedict Arnold, General Charles Cornwallis and General William Philips burned the colonist's tobacco. About 10,000 hogsheads of cured tobacco leaf were destroyed by the British. A tobacco hogshead is a very large wooden barrel. A standardized hogshead measured 48 inches long and 30 inches in diameter at the head each fully packed hogshead of tobacco weighed about 1,000 pounds. The British also burned the colonist's curing barns and tobacco fields, and the British Royal Navy seized shipments of tobacco leaving American ports.

During the Black Patch Tobacco Wars of 1904-1909, about 30 counties in southwestern Kentucky and Tennessee were the worldwide suppliers of dark fired tobacco. This type of tobacco is used primarily in snuff, chewing tobacco, and pipe tobacco. I only raised air cured Burly tobacco. The American Tobacco Company and the Planters' Protective Association locked horns. But many small farmers resorted to violence and vigilante practices, and organized as the Silent Brigade or Night Riders. They destroyed crops, machinery, livestock and tobacco warehouses. They captured whole towns. They raided Hopkinsville, Princeton and Russelleville, Kentucky.

For two years, before the Army Reserve had me on active duty 100 to 150 days a year, I



raised an acre of Burley tobacco. It has thin leaves and light color, and it is used mostly in cigarettes. I was a sharecropper with my father-in-law, Andrew C. Oakley. The old stock barn next to my house on Dyers Hill, had a good size hay loft. All the hay was gone when Andrew sold all the cattle and switched to row crops. I asked Andrew to let me turn the hay loft into curing barn for the Burley tobacco. I put in a large window

and boxed in a section to make a stripping room. I ran an overhead electrical line from my house to the stock barn. I put in two overhead florescent light fixtures.

The access to the hay loft is by wooden stairs. I made a floor door at the top of the stairs to keep in the heat from a small propane heater that I put in the stripping room. I had a radio and a small black and white television mounted on the wall in the stripping room. I built a carousel to hang the tobacco sticks on. Each stick had six to eight tobacco stalks. I had three wooden pressing boxes. One box was for tip leaves; one box was for lugs (the bright leaves), and the third box was for flyings (the leaves at the bottom of the tobacco stalk).

I would strip the flyings off all the stalks first. I had four tobacco sticks on the carousel. This allowed me to strip 30 tobacco stalks. Once I finished with the flyings, I would move down to the lugs, and then down to the tips. I would put each grade in a separate box. I used a tall car jack on top of the box to press it down. I used thick cotton string



inside the box to tie the tobacco bail before I took it out of the pressing box.

Raising Burley tobacco is a very labor intensive job. One third of the total labor, or 73 hours is required to strip one acre of tobacco. That is assuming that you are a fast stripper. I also ran a telephone line over to the stripping room, so that Paula could let me know if we had company or that it was time for supper. Once I stripped all of the tobacco, I would take the tobacco bales to one of the tobacco auction warehouses in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. The tobacco is auctioned off to one of the large tobacco companies. I gave $\frac{1}{4}$ of whatever the tobacco sold for, to Andrew, as I was a sharecropper.

I don't smoke. When I was in the Army back in 1962, I would exchange the cigarettes in the C-Rations for a can of fruit. This was way back when they didn't tell people that cigarettes were addictive and bad for your health, and would give you cancer. John D. Loudermilk wrote the song "Tobacco Road." The one redeeming lyric in the song is found in the Interlude: "Gonna leave, get a job with the help and the grace from above." If I can find something to give honor and glory to Christ, then I am satisfied with the story that I am writing. His grace upon grace upon grace has sustained me, whether in a stripping room or just sitting on my front porch swing. These are some of John Loudermilk's lyrics: "I was born in a trunk. Mama died and my daddy got drunk. Left me here to die alone in the middle of Tobacco Road. Grow up in a rusty shack. All I had was hangin' on my back. Only you know how I loathe this place called Tobacco Road. Gonna leave, get a job with the help and the grace from above. Save some money, get rich and old...".

The corporate farmer, Craig Perry, that rents the farm from the widow lady, has about 20 Mexican guest workers. I watched them do what I did when I raised my acre of tobacco. About four weeks after topping the tobacco stalk, They cut the tobacco stalks and let them wilt in the hot sun. Then they come back and lay a tobacco stick for each six tobacco stalks. They put a metal spike (spud) over the top of the tobacco stick and spear the six stalks onto the tobacco stick. Then they take the harvested tobacco stalks to the barn to air cure. For the Dark tobacco, they cure it in smoke curing barns. Waste wood

from lumber mills is covered with sawdust, inside the barn, and burned to make the smoke.

It's hard work, but it's something that the Mexican labor can do with little or no training. Craig puts out about 300 acres of tobacco each year. His laborers work about ten or eleven months a year and return home for a month to be with their families. Shannon is Craig's daughter and foreman. She is tough, but firm and fair as she supervises the workers. Craig provides free approved housing for the workers. Shannon makes sure that they water when they are working. I marvel how the workers can tolerate the heat and humidity here in Kentucky. I included pictures of them loading the tobacco wagons and taking a rest and water break in the two school buses used to transport them to the tobacco fields.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>