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The Making of a Good Hand

By Bobbie Smith Bryant, Jefferson County

The sight of a tractor making its slow and deliberate way through a freshly plowed field of tobacco here in Western Kentucky is somewhat rare nowadays. Our times, they are a changin', particularly since the 2004 Tobacco Transition Payment Program. While tobacco farming has evolved, many of the old customs remain the same.

Producing a tobacco crop has always been dictated by the seasons. A typical crop can take more than 300 hours of labor per acre. That labor includes many steps and lots of workers to set, hoe, cultivate, cut, house, fire, strip and finally take it to market. As some of the old folks were known say, "Tobacco is a 13-month-a-year job," because, in the past, you started a new crop before you were finished with the previous year's crop.

Every aspect of a tobacco crop requires hands-on labor. While modern techniques have replaced some of the more laborious tasks, such as worming and hoeing, tobacco still requires many hands touching each plant multiple times.

As a young girl growing up on our farm in Calloway County in the 1960s, my jobs included helping pull plants, riding the setter and hoeing. Thank goodness, the more physically demanding tasks of spiking, cutting and housing generally were left to the boys and men, though I did straddle the beams up high in the barn one year, much to the dismay of my mother.

Back then, being "a good hand" was a coveted title. The term was used for boys and girls, men and women, no matter the age or skin color. We young ones were taught and encouraged by our parents and elders as we labored alongside them in every aspect of producing a crop.

If there can be a favorite part to growing tobacco, I'd say mine was the stripping. Let me be clear: It's not the work that was favored but the fellowship that went along with it. Stripping crews usually were a different bunch than the rest of the labor force. In my limited experience, older workers did the stripping, and younger people did the splitting, hanging, housing and firing under the watchful eye of more practiced workers.

My grandparents were involved in our family's farming operation up into their elderly years. I remember them being in the stripping barn when I got home from school.



The author's father, Billy Smith, on a Red Belt Ford in the late 1950s in Calloway County.

Typically, they and a few other hired neighbors lined up on a variety of stools, chairs, buckets and the like, pulling leaves from each stalk, grading them as they went. They were rhythmic and sure, tying a single, folded leaf around the stems of a handful of dark leaves to create a "hand of tobacco."

While this constant motion of stripping and tying ebbed and flowed, the conversation rarely stalled. They told tall tales, shared recipes and an occasional joke, intermingled with local news and the politics of the day, along with recollections about our neighbors, friends and family from years gone by. I was happy to be in their midst, watching, listening and doing, hoping someday I'd make a good hand.

I'm sure my recollections have clouded over time. Yet, my memories of the stripping barn are not so much of how difficult and tiring the work was, but more of a warm remembrance of how I learned to work and to enjoy the work no matter how dirty and grueling. Even more, I came to appreciate the work of others.

The lessons I learned on the farm have stayed with me. I'm grateful for those elders who took the time to show me what to do, corrected me when I fumbled, and encouraged me to keep trying as I worked my way toward making a good hand.

This article is an excerpt from a previously published story titled, "All Hands Are Well," Murray Ledger & Times, May 28, 2020.