

TOBACCO IN NORTH CAROLINA

Tobacco is big business in North Carolina, and definitely has a top-ranking place in our economy. North Carolina is the largest tobacco producing and manufacturing state in the nation.

Tobacco produces over 50 percent of North Carolina's agricultural income. From 500 to 800 million pounds are produced annually, valued at from 200 to 400 million dollars. Aside from the agricultural workers, over 50,000 people are employed in processing and manufacturing plants.

Winston-Salem, Durham and Reidsville have the largest tobacco factories in the world; and Wilson, Greenville and Rocky Mount are the largest bright-leaf tobacco markets. Over 50 percent of all cigarettes are manufactured in this state, with excise levies on them amounting to more than 725 million dollars annually.

Mostly, types of tobacco are grouped according to the three curing methods—flue-cured, air-cured and fire-cured. Other factors, however, such as climate, soil and seed contribute to the quality and characteristics by which the types are known. North Carolina produces the flue-cured (bright leaf) and the air-cured (Burley). Burley tobacco is confined to the mountain regions and the bright leaf is grown in the Piedmont and Coastal regions.

In the first stage of production the seed beds are prepared and sown and the small plants are transplanted in the field. The seeding is usually in January or February, although the seeding for Burley sometimes runs to March.

The small plants are pulled from the bed when they are about six inches in height, and very careful handling is necessary to prevent bruising before they can be transplanted in the field.

The tobacco in the field is cultivated three to six times with a cultivator during the growing season. This is supplemented by hoeing to keep down the weeds.

As the plant matures, a seed flower develops at the top. This flower is pinched off to leave the desired number of leaves on the stalk, and to conserve strength in the leaves. The plant then develops sprouts where the stems of the leaves grow out of the stalk. These are pulled off for the same reason that the tops are removed. Removing these sprouts is called "suckering".

The surplus supply of food stored in the leaves replace in part the green coloring matter giving

them an appearance of a lighter shade of green, this begins in the bottom leaves and continues upward. With the completion of this development, the leaves are ripe.

Harvesting of flue-cured tobacco is generally done in July and August, however, in the warmer climate it may begin in June and in the northern areas extend to September. September is usually the time for harvesting Burley tobacco. As a rule the tobacco plant is ready for harvesting and curing after a growing season of 90 days.

The tobacco selling season begins in North Carolina around the first of August, with the opening of eight Border Belt markets. About three weeks later the New Bright Belt, covering the Eastern N. C. Tobacco Belt, opens two to four weeks later with eight towns participating, and the Burley Belt opens around the first week in December.

Tobacco is brought to the warehouses by all modes of conveyance, from horse and wagon up to large trucks. At the warehouse the tobacco is unloaded into baskets, furnished by the warehouse, with the grades of tobacco kept separate.

The time of tobacco sales is set by a local Tobacco Board of Trade. The number of daily sales depends upon the size of the market, and each warehouse takes its turn in having first, second, third and fourth sales. Sets of buyers, consisting of qualified persons representing tobacco companies, follow each sale. The number of sets of buyers for each market is set by the Tobacco Association of the United States.

A representative of the warehouse, who is qualified by experience, sets the starting price of each pile of tobacco. This is the cue for the Auctioneer to break into his chant, repeating the starting figure rapidly until a buyer indicates that he will increase the bid. Various signs such as winking an eye, raising a finger, or nod of the head indicate that a buyer will increase the bid. Sales proceed in this manner until all piles are sold. Farmers have the privilege of accepting or rejecting the bid.

From the warehouse the tobacco goes to a Prize House if it is inconvenient to deliver it immediately to a processing plant. The purpose of the Prize House is to pack the tobacco in "Hogsheads" for shipment to redrying and stemming plants, preparatory to its going into storage for aging prior to manufacture of cigarettes, smoking tobacco and other tobacco products.