

# The Progress

Published Monthly

Morrisville, N.C.

March 27, 1996

## Farmers a vanishing breed in Morrisville

Only a handful depend on crops for livelihood

By Ron Page

The mules are gone. So is the family milk cow, the two or three hogs that provided food for the family, along with the stick barn, and the tenant worker. Life for the dirt farmer in North Carolina has changed, but in the flatlands of Carpenter and Morrisville, those who still work the soil remain loyal to what has always been the crop of choice—tobacco.

"When you talk farming in this area of North Carolina, you talk tobacco," said Omer Ferrell outside one of his barns alongside Morrisville-Carpenter Road. "No other crop has ever been able to pay for itself hereabouts."

Around the corner on Carpenter Upchurch Road, retired agricultural official William B. Upchurch recalls the days when tobacco fields stretched as far as one could see on his grandfather's farm, when the crop blanketed land where Raleigh-Durham International Airport now stands, and Durham was known as the tobacco town because of its tobacco warehouses and popular auctioneers calling bids in a rapid, sing-song voice.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, tobacco ruled family life 12 months of the year. Children literally grew up with the crop. Garry Edwards, a fifth-generation Carpenter farmer who with his brother, Rickey, today farms about 100 owned-and-rented acres planted solely with tobacco, is one example.

"My mother would bring me to the fields before I could walk and sit me in the shade at the edge of the rows where she worked," he said. "When I was six or so I picked up tobacco leaves that had dropped in the barn, then graduated to priming (picking) the leaves in the field. As I got older I hung them on loops in the stick barn, and finally rode the tractor. It wasn't easy work, but it was something I grew to love."

Talk about farming in the same area today and only four family names continue to crop up, the three previously mentioned and the Lee Powell family on Good Hope Church Road. A couple of acres of pick-your-own strawberry plants can be seen popping through the ribbons of black plastic that keeps down the weeds, but Powell will tell you it's tobacco that covers the majority of the 100-plus acres he owns and rents.

Of the four major growers, only Upchurch left working in the fields for other environs. A graduate of North Carolina State University, he became a district representative for the N.C. Farm Bureau in 1963, covering an area of 17 counties. Last November he retired from the bureau as director of field operations.

"The war was over and the boom in farming had ended when I left. I felt that I could do more or do something to help by working for the Farm Bureau," he said. Upchurch rented his land so it still remained in production. It is rented and farmed today by the Steve Gooch family.

Both Upchurch and his wife Dorothy, who grew up on nearby Green Level Church Road, recall the days when mules provided the power to plow and cultivate the fields, pulling the wooden wagons that carried the piles of green, funnel-shaped leaves to the barns for curing.

Upchurch's grandfather came to the area in 1864. "He gave the land for the railroad line," he said. That line runs alongside Carpenter Upchurch Road and the tree-shaded home his father built in 1936 and in which he and his wife live today.

As Upchurch spoke, a train passed by slowly. "It only goes about 15 miles an hour," Upchurch smiled. "The tracks are old and they (the trainmen) use care."

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KEEPING THE TRADITION ALIVE—Rickey and Garry Edwards, fifth generation tobacco farmers in Carpenter, took over their father's

operation when he moved to quieter quarters in Virginia to raise cattle.

## Settlement deals blow to tobacco

The revelation this month that the Liggett Group has settled a huge lawsuit out of court in regard to manipulating nicotine levels is seen as just another bump in the road for those who make their livelihood by growing tobacco.

That's the way Bob Jenkins of the North Carolina Farm Bureau characterizes the settlement, in which the company has agreed to pay 5 percent of its pre-tax profits for the next 25 years or \$50 million a year, whichever is less. The funds will support programs to help people stop smoking.

"It's (the decision) neither good or bad," Jenkins said. "It's only an initial step, yet that type of publicity cannot be good for the tobacco industry. It's just another bump to the growers."

North Carolina tobacco accounts for about 8 percent of that grown in the world, half of which goes into cigarettes for the overseas market. The Liggett Group, which has a plant in Durham, accounts for 2 percent of that amount.

But for grower Garry Edwards of the Carpenter community, the future of tobacco may really be determined by the cost to the grower. "Many are being forced to sell their land, the value has gotten so high. I really can't see my kids doing it," he said. "I wanted them to experience it, but the amount of land available will be much smaller because of the pressure to fill housing needs."

Edwards says many of the older farmers are bitter about the adverse publicity the product has been getting. "It's been part of our culture since the time of the Indians," he said.

Grower Omer Ferrell agrees. Another major tobacco grower based in Carpenter, Ferrell says he didn't want

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JUST LIKE HOME—Dorothy Upchurch keeps an old pot over the fireplace and other antique farm tools scattered about in a log cabin she and hus-

band William own by the side of Carpenter Upchurch Road. The couple bought the cabin about 20 years ago from a family in Carpenter.

## Collection of antique farm tools a link to Carpenter couple's rural upbringing

By Ron Page

The old log cabin has cement lath between the logs and looks as though it has just been constructed. But it dates back to the mid-1800s. Nestled by the side of Carpenter Upchurch Road just south of Green Hope Church Road, the cabin is in perfect condition mainly because it was protected for years by a larger building which surrounded it.

Owners William and Dorothy Upchurch had the cabin moved to its present site at the edge of an idyllic pond in 1976, purchasing it from the Bobby Pittard family in Carpenter. When it was first constructed, the cabin was home to a family of seven and had one door to get in and out. "As the family grew," Mrs. Upchurch explains, "other rooms were added, and each time another door was cut in a side to gain access to the new area. Eventually the cabin was inside another building and that's where it was when we got it."

It was on July 9, 1986, when Sen. Robert Dole, accompanied by William Coby who was then 4th district congressman and who was later to become Morrisville town manager, visited the cabin and the Upchurch place as the first stop on a three-farm visit to North Carolina during a study of tobacco. Mrs. Upchurch smiles about it today, saying: "I never saw such a white shirt in those tobacco fields!"

Today the cabin is home for dozens of reminders of the days when it was built, including early tools farmers used to care for the farm livestock and the tobacco that blanketed the nearby fields.

"This is called a handsetter," Upchurch says, picking up a metal funnel-like apparatus, with a second smaller funnel attached to its side. "I used this so many times when I was growing up. This carried both water and plants and was used to set them in the ground." Nearby, another wood object, in the shape of a large L, was

used to measure a space of 24 inches to separate plants in the row.

Hanging on a wall are two wire basket-like objects which Upchurch calls muzzles. "The mules wore them over their faces as they went through the tobacco or corn fields to stop them from nibbling," he said. "Nibbling wasn't too much of a problem with tobacco, because it didn't taste good, but they could ruin a stalk or a lot of corn simply by taking a bite into it." Old animal halters are also to be found.

Another relic of early tobacco days is a wood stick arrangement that was used to hang or loop the long, wide tobacco leaves when they were put into the barn for curing. "That also was a job that took a lot of time. Tobacco was always a labor-intensive crop," Upchurch explained. A round, flat woven basket used to carry the leaves to the barn leans against a wall.

Corn shellers, metal meat

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## Cornerstone apartment complex pedestrian friendly

By Ron Page

The sign by the side of High House Road identifies the project as Cornerstone Apartments, but this is more than the conventional housing complex the name suggests. It is a new approach in this area to meeting the needs of today's lifestyles.

Located just west of Davis Drive and within walking distance of the Cornerstone Shopping Center, the first units of the 302 upscale one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments are expected to be ready for occupancy late this spring. In fact, Project Supervisor Mike Progdon says the entire project is expected to be completed by December or

just after the first of the year, including the walkways which provide the innovation.

"The apartments are part of the overall master plan for the area," says John Felton, associate architect for Cline Davis Architects of Raleigh, the firm which designed the buildings and had a major role in the design of Cornerstone Shopping Center.

Both the apartment complex, which includes nine buildings, and the shopping center combine to make what is referred to as a mixed-use facility. Set on 25 acres with integrated parking, the new apartment complex includes a clubhouse for residents with an exercise

room, sauna and swimming pool. A special croquet court and picnic facilities at a pond are also part of the amenities. But what makes it different is that it has been designed specifically to afford its residents easy walking access to other amenities—namely, the shopping center and related outparcels.

"From a planning point of view," Felton said, "the overall concept was to meet the challenges of today's lifestyles. Residents will be able to walk to the center, rather than drive. For instance, if someone has a dog, they will be able to walk the dog to the vet in the shopping center, or walk to the food store, or the bank. They will have benefits

of a health facility without the need to use the car. There will be no need to drive or go on High House Road for things other residents usually have to do."

Interior connecting roads and walkways to the shopping center will be part of the construction along with the apartment building project itself, Progdon explained.

"There was a period of time when driving to facilities was popular," Felton pointed out, "and it is true we are still in an automobile environment. However, we are hoping to limit the number of car trips each day, and provide a means of getting away from the use of cars for a while."

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