

## Farmers a vanishing breed in Morrisville; handful depend on crops for livelihood

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Care is a familiar word to the tobacco farmer. "It's a delicate plant and needs tender care and handling," Upchurch explained. "No matter the size of the farm—and there were a number of small 5-to-10-acre places, and others of several hundred acres—they were labor intensive, and families swapped labor when needed." He said the larger operations had tenant farmers who worked on a share basis, the owner providing the mules and barns.

"From the middle 1800s to about 1960, Durham was the tobacco town, the place where most growers carried their crop," said Upchurch. "Apex also had a small warehouse operation, but Durham did most of the work."

The Upchurch family grew some sweet potatoes, and, like all farms at the time, had two to three hogs which were butchered for food. "There were smokehouses and the meat was canned (sealed in fruit jars). Families had to be self-sufficient and the children were a part of that sufficiency as soon as they could help," he said, adding that each farm grew some wheat (to make flour) and oats, grain, and corn (to feed the animals).

Then came World War II and the technology it brought with it changed the face of agriculture forever. "Tractors became available," Upchurch said. Tobacco plant beds were sown in January and February, and seedlings were transplanted in early May, with harvesting from July to September. "One of the first things I did as a child was to carry water during planting, and then carry the plants," he said. "The rows were marked and I would also pat the hills to firm in each plant which had been placed by someone with more experience. A tool called a handsetter was used. Today plants are set by automatic droppers from the back of tractors."

Omer Ferrell's Grading Company sign is painted on a barn across from his sprawling white farmhouse on Morrisville-Carpenter Road where some 50 geese walk about one of the pastures. "No, we don't grow geese. My wife just likes to have them around," Ferrell smiled.

He and his son, David, farm about 60 acres in Carpenter these days, a cutback from a half-dozen years ago when he had 200 under cultivation. In his sixties today, Ferrell recalls helping in the stick

barn when he was eight or nine, handing the tobacco leaves to a worker who would tie them on sticks to be dried by a wood fire. "Later the fire was replaced by bulk drying with huge fans and heated air," he explained.

"Up to 1950 it was hard to get a new tractor and a good team of mules was highly valued," he said. "There were three mule dealers in Creedmoor and others in Apex, and some farmers even bought them in Tennessee."

Ferrell remembers the hogs and how the meat was prepared, how the bone meat was salted, cooking a loin of pork, and the way sausage was stuffed in a cotton sock and hung in the smokehouse six to eight weeks for the best flavor. "Life was so different then," he said. "You worked all week, went to church on Sundays. Family life centered around the community and church," he said.

Ferrell's family originally settled in a log cabin in Chatham County where his grandfather had a sawmill from 1895 to 1900. Said Ferrell: "Logging was good. He paid 10 cents for a tree that was two feet in diameter at eye level and sold it for \$8 per 1,000 linear feet. He bought 130 acres on Morrisville-Carpenter Road in Morrisville to be closer to the railroad which hauled his wood. But when the Durham and Southern Railroad was built, he moved back. He kept the house here and reopened the mill as well as a farm store. He died at 62 in 1933."

Ferrell said most of the big farms split up in the 1950s, selling to or combining with other farms. "Tobacco had been the mainstay in North Carolina since the country was colonized, but farming is not even a factor any more in North Carolina, what with land prices and taxes," Ferrell said. "The farmer rolls with the punches, but he can't keep going." The Ferrells recently sold 72 of their acres on Upchurch Road to the Cary Board of Education, which plans to build a high school on the site.

As for Rickey and Garry Edwards, the brothers farm about 60 acres in the area of Upchurch Deadend Road at the southern edge of Preston Village and some in Apex. They own about 40 of the acres and rent the rest. Their father still farms, but has left the area to raise beef cattle in West Virginia.

As fifth-generation farmers, they both started when they were about age 5 or 6, learning their trade

literally from the ground up—gathering leaves that had fallen, later putting them on sticks in the barn, finally driving a tractor.

Garry feels priming (picking) the leaves was the worst. "You had to work the rows methodically in hot sun and parching heat, always working in a bent-over position as you picked off the lower leaves on the first go-round, later those higher up, and finally the upper ones. But those lower leaves were the worst. You could hardly breathe by the end of a row because it was so hot and dusty and just gasping for breath at times made you choke."

Garry said he recalls his father trying tobacco all day. Today they try to work only in the morning. "Some families still share crop as they have for 20 or 30 years, people like Maggie Jacobs, Ernest Medlin Jr., Dewey and Dough Moduffy," he said.

Edwards said most of the tobacco grown locally today goes to market in Fuquay-Varina. Most of the supplies to grow it come from Carpenter Farm Supply store, which has been in business since 1885.

His father's homestead was just off Davis Drive in what is now one of the Preston developments, and the farm itself extended across what is now part of the golf course at Prestonwood Country Club, Garry said. "I recall playing golf there one day and of course I didn't recognize anything, but suddenly I saw a creek and knew I was standing on ground that used to be a grazing field for my father's beef cattle. It was an eerie feeling," he said.

When they were married, Garry and his wife lived in one of the old stick barns. Seven years ago they built a spacious low-country home near Preston Village. They have three children, ages one, six and eight.

He said he doesn't expect any of their children to continue farming,

but hopes they'll be able to experience it somewhat growing up. "That's all I can hope for," he said.

Lee Phillips, his wife Sue, and their four children live in a large brick colonial home on Good Hope Church Road on acreage Phillips farms and near the site which his grandfather gave his father. His grandfather farmed cotton and tobacco in Moore County before moving to Carpenter, and gave all of his children land for a homestead.

Today Phillips grows rye for straw and seed, some strawberries, and collards in the winter, but most of the 100 acres he farms in various areas of Wake County are in tobacco. Brothers Al and Bill are in farming, but Ted, a third brother, moved to Chicago.

"I remember hanging around the farm watching the men work, but I was in school when the planting and cultivation took place," he said. Phillips relies on tobacco as the

main crop, but decided to try a patch of pick-your-own vegetables a few years ago. "It did pretty good for a while, but then tapered off. People don't seem to want to pick fresh vegetables. They'd rather buy them at the store," he said. "They don't realize the difference in fresh-picked vegetables."

So he switched to strawberries and admits they've done very well. He has several acres devoted to strawberries on land next to his house. "They are easier to handle," he said. "People don't want to pick butterbeans. I don't want to, either."

Phillips doesn't see any of his four children, ages 18, 15, 14 and 8, farming for a livelihood. "Agriculture in general is doomed," Phillips said. "It costs a lot of money, effort and time to farm. I've given it 20 years of my life, but today we're faced with more construction, housing needs and rising land prices."

## Settlement a blow

Continued from page 1  
to get into the government's actions against the industry, but questioned the emphasis placed on tobacco as compared to that made against alcohol. "Advertising on television is one example. You won't find tobacco, but you won't have any trouble finding beer commercials."

The suit was not the only "bump" to the farmers this month. Citing affidavits from former Philip Morris employees, the Food and Drug Administration charged the company with controlling nicotine levels.

## Collection a link

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grinders that were used in the 1800s, milk coolers, square tin bread warmers are on shelves, and an old black iron pot where foods were prepared hangs in the fireplace, just above the iron skewers that held the meat over the flames.

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