

Tobacco Production Facing Revolutionary Changes

In the past 30 years — since the invention of the first successful oil-burning tobacco curer — there have been many changes in the job of converting the tiny tobacco seed into the aromatic weed leaf that winds up in the tobacco hogshead.

There is some body of evidence to indicate that other, and more radical changes are not too far away in this growing, harvesting and curing end of one of our nation's oldest businesses.

All tobacco farmers who keep in fairly constant touch with their industry are aware of the continuing efforts that have been made in the general direction of bulk curing. So far no system that is economically and mechanically feasible has been found.

Some ways have been found that cure tobacco as well as the old fashioned curing barn, and just as economically, but tobacco is basically a crop of small acreage for the vast majority of those engaged in its growth. This tends to hinder most of the bulk curing systems that have been put on the market up until now.

The tobacco harvester has been with us for many years now, and many improvements have been made in the original design of these gadgets that crawl through the field, collecting the ripened leaves of tobacco.

Oil, coal, natural gas and bottled gas have practically eliminated the original curing system which included wood by the cord and heavy brick furnaces that required almost constant tending, and mending.

Nearly all of the major tobacco manufacturing companies have their own experimental farms. One of the largest of these is at Merry Hill in Bertie County. It is owned by R. J. Reynolds Company of Winston-Salem.

For more than four years this largest cigarette manufacturer has been pouring money into this farm, while keeping the tightest kind of security wrap on what it was seeking to do with its experiments. Some newsmen say it's far easier to get into Cape Kennedy than into Reynolds' Merry Hill Farm.

But despite fences, guards and

tight-lipped officials there are some aspects of this experimentation that the Reynolds folks cannot cover completely.

Among these is its importation of vast amounts of electrical equipment and the maintenance of a staff of electronics engineers.

Also it is no secret that they have been working closely with both private and government geneticists in an effort to develop a flue-cured tobacco variety that will ripen all the way from the lugs to the tips at the same time.

Dr. Hoyt Rogers, vice president of the Coker Seed Company, at Hartsville, S. C. told a Lenoir County group last month that his company already had numerous varieties of tobacco that would ripen all the way up the stalk at the same time.

Dr. Rogers also said his company had provided at least four of the major tobacco manufacturers with these types of seed, and was working closely with them in this direction.

Dr. Rogers said that among these experiments in test plots was mechanical cutting of root

structure at a given point in the growth, but he admitted that this presented quite a problem under many field conditions and was less practical where stones and other foreign matter made such an operation more difficult and in some areas impossible.

Putting tobacco varieties that ripen all the way up the stalk at the same time together with vast collection of electrical equipment and electronic engineers adds up very quickly to once-over harvesting and custom curing.

When enough brains, enough money and enough time are spent on this combination a break-through is inevitable, and some say very near at hand.

Others say the tobacco manufacturers are near that point where they will deliver a specific type of seed to a selected group of farmers and either contract for their whole crop or agree to pay a premium for its delivery.

This is nothing new in agribusiness circles since many processors of agricultural products have been doing this for a very

long time to assure the particular type and quantities that they need for their sales commitments.

No one would suggest that this is something that will happen to next year's crop, but the day is not so far off when flue-cured tobacco will be harvested like burley tobacco, cured in either centralized plants or on mobile units, whichever is proven to be most practical and offers the greatest economy.

The savings to the farmer is obvious, providing the curing costs can be kept even with what it is today per pound of tobacco, and there is a strong likelihood that it will be much less when done on a great volume basis.

Elimination of auction sales houses will obviously hurt the handful of operators of these in each community, but the savings to be earned by either or both the grower and the manufacturer are equally obvious.

Putting tobacco in this category will make it comparable to corn; as a crop that can be grown and harvested mechanically.

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Tobacco Trucking Another Profession Hit by Automation



This happy young man belongs to a profession that with many another is suffering from the spread of automation to the tobacco fields. He was captain of the ship that sailed between the waving fields of tobacco and the home port on the shady side of the curing barn. He was not bound to the back-breaking lot of croppers in the field, nor the tedious handing to the loopers at the barn. He, the horse, the mule and the unique "truck" he captained are fast becoming a cherished memory, and there are indications that his profession will soon join that of the buggy maker and blacksmith.

Tobacco Barning No Longer That Time Of Toil and Frolic of A Generation Ago

By Jack Rider

Once upon a time "puttin' in bacco" was a lot of fun.

For some it still may be, but nothing like it was in those tight, tired times between the two World Wars when tobacco was just a part of Eastern North Carolina farm life and not the shaggy tail that wagged the entire farm dog.

The rich, sweet smell of oak logs sending their heat through the thick-walled furnace to yellow and dry the long leaves hanging in the barn. That is one small part of "puttin' in time" that's gone forever.

The women around the looping horses under the shelter by the barns, with the old folks and children "handing" off the truck as the squeak-squeak of tightened leaves punctuated the stories, the ribbings and the dreams of "selling time" were told and re-told.

The clop-clop of the horse or mule as he was guided in with a fresh load of the gummy leaves; presided over by the luckiest of the youngsters who was doing the "trucking."

He was not only the engineer, conductor and fireman aboard that creaky four-wheeled tobacco express, but was also the news media who commuted between the men, cropping in the fields and the luckier ones in the shade around the barn.

He told the field hands how long it was before dinner, how many sticks were hung, and brought along jars of cool water to replace the sweat pouring from their bodies.

From the fields he brought to the barn predictions about how many more truckloads would "get over," and if he were a top "trucker" in the worst of the afternoon heat he'd bring in a watermelon or two that had been cooling in the creek; waiting to make its contribution to the workday.

And then when the last gummy load came wobbling to the barn, the tired men came to josh the women and children and begin the even hotter job of transferring the sticky stuff from the hanging racks to the

curing barn.

The spread-eagle stance of the men on the tier-poles, with sweat running down their legs to drip on those below.

And with the barn full came a collective sign of relief and a huge supper with mountains of tender fresh vegetables, crusty cornbread, buckets of tea and lemonade, with huge chunks of crystal-clear ice from the old ice box.

And then at night, in the glow of oak logs and a smoky kerosene lantern around the barn tender ears of corn were roasted, for dessert and fantastic tales were told about the graveyard by the road, to crowd the small ones closer to the light.

And when the last barn of the season had been filled and the fires started the big black pot was scrubbed and polished and children were busy running down fat hens while the women rolled out stacks of "pastry" for the stew that always marked the end of barning.

Today some of this remains, but not much.

Spindly looking praying mantis machinery chugs slowly through the fields, with the loopers and hangers and pilot on the hurricane deck and the croppers swinging from bucket seats in the hot shade of crowded alleys.

There is talk as there was before, but it muted in deference to the mixture; where before it was more racy in the fields and at the barn.

There is still good country eating — but not at the barn — which smells of kerosene or bottled gas and is deserted except for occasional checks by the man who has that responsibility.

Forty years ago tobacco was farming. Today it is a big, complex business, involving expensive machinery, high-priced fertilizer, curing equipment and even more expensive labor.

Farmers make more money from it today, but they had a helluva lot more fun with it way back then . . .