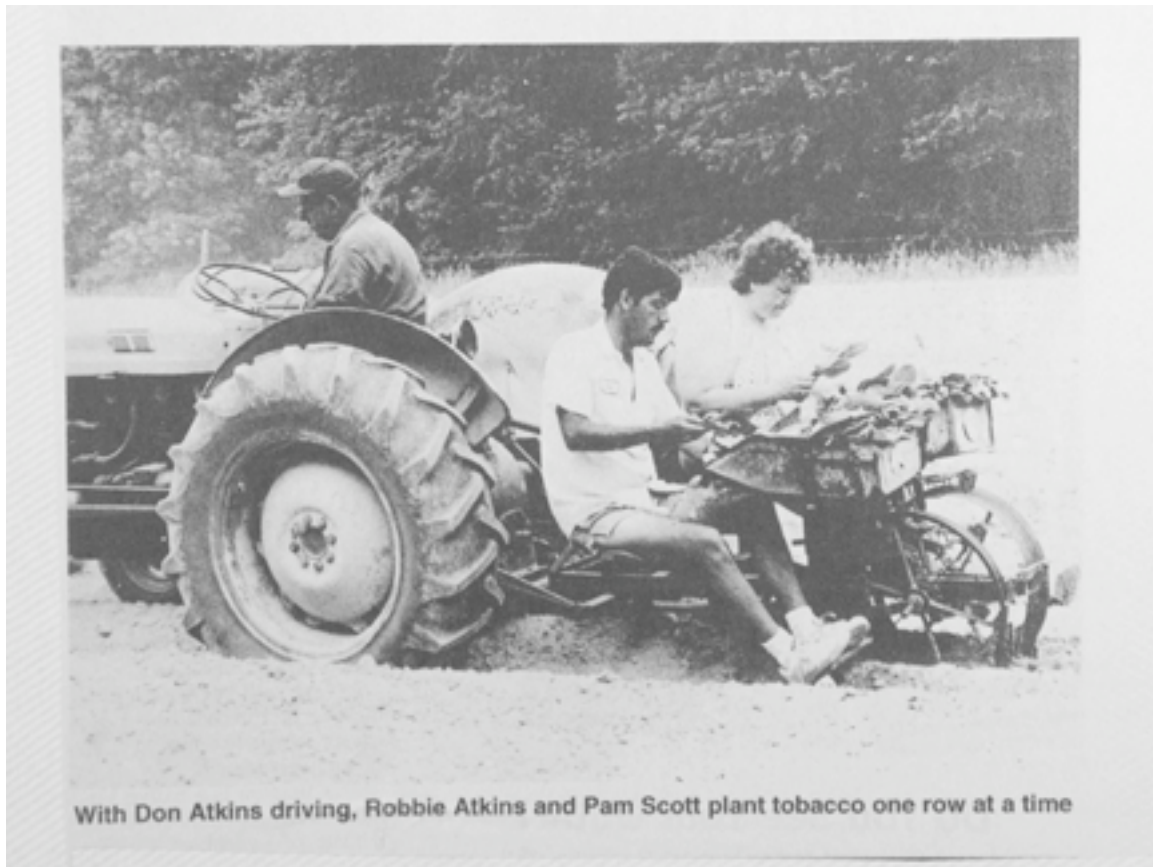


Tobacco farmers find few dreams to plant



On land that was granted to her family by the King of England more than 200 years ago, Phyllis Atkins of Lunenburg looks at the future of tobacco on her farm and shakes her head.

The thought of her land without tobacco is difficult to imagine. Her ancestors have raised their families in the house she lives in for 235 years, thanks to tobacco, she said.

Her grandfather was Charles Hardy—the last of seven Charles Hardys, until her father, Covington Hardy, broke the tradition. You can tell by the feel of the farm that this land has been tilled for many generations. One land, one family, one main crop—tobacco.

No one has even interrupted the planting of tobacco here—until now. She and her husband, Don, are wondering if this will be their last tobacco drop.

“We’ll probably start phasing it out. This may be our last year. Labor seems to be the small farmers’ problem. We’re thinking about going back to raising beef cattle,” she said one afternoon last week while her husband was out planting one of their fields on the 135-acre farm.

Everywhere you looked on this old farm—so far off the hard surface road that you would never know there was a farm here—weathered outbuildings seemed to defy time.

Parked farm equipment from past decades created a museum showing the evolution of farm machinery.

Men who work in town during the day and farm in the evening don't have time to wrestle with weeds and fix barn doors. Now, only the tobacco fields were clear of weeds. The rest of the old farm seemed to be in a deep sleep.

The Atkins have two sons, Robert, the oldest, was out planting with his father. Through him, they hope to keep the farm in the family. Her youngest son would have liked to stay, she said, if the farm could have produced enough for him to support a family.

"We've gotten away from self-sufficiency on the farm, and it makes me sad," she said, recalling the days when hogs were slaughtered for meat and neighbors helped neighbors shuck corn. "You stayed busy, even in the winter"

But before tobacco, there was the land. "God made farmers and He made weather," she said. And when you put the two together, something always grows. When you have land, you always have possibilities. Mrs. Atkins was not without hope.

"It's lovely here," she said. "The land has always called me. I think the farmers have always thought the land was on a loan. They treat it with respect. It's not as easy life, but it's a good life."

Finding an alternative to tobacco is not easy, she said. "We've gone that route earlier with green peppers, string beans, and cherry tomatoes at the co-op in Burkeville."

But you still have to have labor." A small family of two can't manage to do all that harvesting.

"Around here it seems that tobacco is all that anybody knows how to do."

But tobacco plants were being set out, and there was no time now to ponder the future.