

Tobacco's promise has burned down to the stub



Growing tobacco in Virginia has been like smoking a 300-year cigar—so long you couldn't see the end of it, so pervasive you didn't think you could survive without it.

But the cigar has smoked down to a bitter end for many tobacco farmers, and some are deciding to throw their once proud livelihood on the ground and walk away.

Last year, Sydney Floyd, 65, took his last drag on a way of life he has known since he first started walking. When he sells the tobacco now in his barns, that will end his tobacco farming, he says.

"I've been raising tobacco all my life," he said recently at his Blackstone farm. "I grew up on a tobacco farm in Dinwiddie County."

"When I was four years-old, I was handing my mother leaves to tie on a stick. My daddy raised tobacco in the summertime, sold hay in the winter, and raised 11 children. We'd buy a farm, move on to it, fix it up, and then sell it."

For tobacco farmers like Floyd, separating the business of tobacco from its roots in his life is painfully difficult because growing tobacco and the flavor and feel of

childhood re tied in the same bundle of memories. Every tobacco farmer's child was taught: you take care of tobacco, and it will take care of you.

Finding labor was never a problem because you could depend on your neighbors. "The best time for labor was when I was a child. We never hired labor. Each family helped the other. Up to WWII, help was never a problem," said Floyd. But in recent years finding labor has become his nightmare.

Last year Floyd raised 107,000 pound of flue tobacco on his Ridge Road farm. He still has 30,000 pounds of it in his barn. He opened on of the barn doors and let the rich gold colors spill out. Feel and smell this, he urged, searching leaves father back from the door that wasn't too dried out. "That'll bring \$1.85 a pound," he said proudly.

But each year, the problems in bringing in Mexican labor mounted. Last year Floyd had six workers. "It's just not worth it. The reports you have to make. You have to pay for the workers from the time they leave their home, plus provide a place for them to live when they are here. Mexican help will end up costing over \$7 an hour when you figure in all the extras. Last year our payroll was \$38,000, and the average worker profited more that I did because eery dolor went back to Mexico where it's worth more." Floyd was more than a little irritated at the obstacles put in th way of his growing tobacco.

"New restrictions came out this April, and the penalties are such that it is too much of a gamble dealing with the help. The government says that if I do something wrong with these people it's going to fine me \$10,000. The cost has increased, the hassle has increased...It's not worth it!"

Floyd also had a lot to say about tobacco companies. "They want to raise their tobacco in the Phillipines and other countries like that. They tet the seeds form us and rise it over there for nothing. They don't want to grow it here. Four and fiv auction sales a week are seeing big North Carolina tobacco farmers going out of business. At the same time, tobacco companies are doubling their production overseas."

So Floyd is giving up tobacco. He'll survive, however, because his daddy taught him how to do that. But he just shakes his head about the future of farming in this area: "If you think you can pay for a farm on anything other than tobacco, you're mistaken."

Another farmer, B.W.Gunn, who is just down the road from Floyd, says the tobacco farmer's world is floating on anxiety. Farmers he talks to are very upset about the future.

Like Floyd, Gunn grew up on a farm with a large family. "My daddy said there wasn't room for all you Gunn boys in Lunenburg county. You got to get out. I came over here and it was the best move I ever made I was away from dad, on my own, but not too far away." He bought his farm on Route 46 in 1950.

Gunn, however, for health reasons, began growing tobacco plants in greenhouses, which use the float system. "I'm running about 12,000 float trays here," he said as he was giving some new seeds a soft mist to get their roots started. Protected by double layers of thick plastic, young plants grow quickly in this controlled environment. You can depend on greenhouse plants, said Gunn.

But modern efficiency is not enough to turn the economic forces building like a wind storm on the backs of Virginia tobacco farmers. There is no greenhouse to protect the farmer.

Gunn talked about the current politics running against tobacco production, the proposed tax on cigarettes, bans on smoking and anti-smoking campaigns; “Politics is going to ruin us. You can make something bad out of anything. And the tobacco companies are going to look out for themselves by going elsewhere to find their profit,” he added. And that leaves Virginia tobacco farmers just a little closer to the dust.

“Everybody I see says they are just taking one year at a time. Nothing is for sure anymore,” said Gunn.

But quitting tobacco, whether you smoke it or grow it, is never easy—the longing always lingers in the back of your mind.