

Old ways ever die in dark tobacco barns



Still Dependable

Despite adverse changes in the economy and the national attitude towards smoking, Avery Rash's dark-fired tobacco is still his most dependable crop. Rash is the fourth generation to grow dark tobacco on his farm near Kenbridge.

The air bit at your throat when you walked into the barn but the space was as comfortable as an old pipe. This was the tobacco barn of Avery Rash on Route 645 in Lunenburg County, the heartland of the Virginia dark-fired tobacco.

His mother Ruth and his wife Anne sat on each side of him. Their forms were silhouetted by the light which filtered through the window and a sense of timelessness pervaded the scene. They were grading the tobacco Rash would take to Blackstone's Planters Warehouse next Tuesday.

He felt good about Wednesday's opening day. He had averaged \$1.52 on the 2,500 pounds he had sold. His top that day was \$1.70. And he would take tobacco there two more times before the season was over after Christmas.

Rash always has some of the best tobacco in the area and is someone to aspire to and learn from, a neighbor said. Not many farmers had grown Virginia's dark tobacco as long as Rash.

Rash is the fourth generation to raise dark tobacco on this farm that had been in his family since before the Civil War. He and his mother weren't sure of the date when tobacco first came here though. Time as well as light seemed to be absorbed by the dark brown colors that spread out around their feet.

"When I was a kid we did 20 to 25 acres of dark tobacco...now I do about five." He laughed and his wife laughed as they sensed the coming thought. "But we're still doing it just about like it was done 200 years ago."

The land, the barns, the farmer and his wife and mother seemed to be perfectly in tune with the rhythms of the tobacco plants.

The worn chairs, the weathered wood of the barn, the relaxed movements of their bodies all said there had always been tobacco here. Rash could not even separate his first memories from the production of tobacco. His mother had always carried him as a toddler to these piles of leaves on the floor.

But Rash's land, once known as the old Browder estate when it was over 1000 acres, had shrunk with time to 350 acres. And now the market and the attitudes towards tobacco were changing. On the average Rash said he could see the net profit from tobacco growing less each year.

But changes were also happening deep below the pocket book, like the loss of pride that used to come from growing a good crop of tobacco. The changing national attitude toward smoking has affected him and the cigarette's smoke was going stale. "When the news media talks about the drug pushers and you put the two together you can't help but wonder..." Rash himself quit smoking some time ago.

Everywhere he looked the continuity with the past seasons of life was breaking. His three children were not here to help him as he was here to help his father. His seed has found another soil to grow in. They had become schoolteachers. "I'm so glad they're not here. I don't know what to do." He laughed, and you weren't sure where the sorrow was. Now there would get no more generations of Rash's spending their winter days in a tobacco barn, but he didn't say that.

With children leaving, getting good help to replace them was a problem—the main problem, his wife said. Rash pointed to World War II as the turning point in tobacco's fortune. With the trend away from sharecropping good labor has been hard to find. "If I can get four together, I'm happy."

This was a hand-made life and it was solid, like the earth was solid. He had the land and he didn't have to go into debt buying expensive equipment to harvest the tobacco. Despite the end of the cigarette now becoming at least a possibility, "It's still the most dependable crop you can have in this area," he said. He was just like a smoker unable to contemplate a world without cigarette. Rash had faith that "some people would always be smoking."

There was nothing like the flavor and feel of the dark tobacco whose rich leaves were used in chewing and pipe tobacco and snuff. Rash remembered those sweet days

when Blackstone had three warehouses for dark tobacco where 12,000,000 pounds were sold each season.

But again that war: “Man, Pickett really cut down in the dark tobacco production,” he said, pausing to punctuate its importance. “Now you see only about 3,000,000 and there are only three warehouses for dark tobacco in the whole state.” But it was not possible in that barn to imagine a Rash far without tobacco.

Change...how could he change. The extension agents were talking about alternative crops, “but raising tobacco is all I know.” His hands kept sorting even though he was looking up. A wood stove kept the room safe from the approaching cold that was supposed to bring snow in the morning.

In January he would plant the seedbeds for next year’s crop. His mother evoked a chuckle among the three. “It takes 13 months to make a crop of tobacco.” Obviously you couldn’t grow tobacco without humor.

What was it that made the laughter and the mind so easy when the work was so hard? Just opening the door to the barn and looking into its secrets could not tell you what lay deep beneath the words. No probing intellect could touch the place where the tobacco farmer and his family bonded with the earth and her silent rhythms.

The piles of tobacco leaves were wrapped and hung on sticks now. Aging bodies rose and stretched, but life would go on...as long as there was another crop of tobacco.