

PICKIN' TOBACCO

Just after my 14th birthday, I got my first 8-hour a day, five or six day a week job. I had already worked the previous two bowling seasons at the Bowling Center on Migeon Avenue so it wasn't my first work experience which gave me a little bit of an edge over some of the other kids.

Up at 5:30 a.m. to catch the bus at 6:15 at the circle near the old North School (now the police station). I was optimistically excited but nervous as I walked the mile from my home on College Avenue. As near as I can remember, there were four busses there that first day, the girls and boys on separate busses. After we boarded and headed toward East Main to pick up more kids, there was the steady but subdued chatter among those already aboard. Our bus was parked directly behind a bus that the girls were boarding. Being normal 14 year olds with roaring hormones, we ogled them appreciatively. Sixty one years later, at seventy five, I still have a mental picture of one buxom young lady who could have passed for twenty five. The sight of these pretty young ladies lifted our spirits and made the trip to the fields shorter and more upbeat.

SUCKERING

When we arrived at the fields and awaited our assignments, I think we were all a little surprised at how many of us were there. That morning there were 138 young men from Torrington. It was a quiet and orderly group, mostly because apprehension had set in. Shade grown tobacco is grown under nets and at the point we arrived is around three feet tall, with the main leaves starting at around 10 inches from the bottom. Our task was to strip off any small leaves from this point down by wrapping a hand around the stem at that point just below the main leaves and pull down removing suckers to the bottom, then cupping both hands into the dirt, push it firmly around the stem of the plant. It's simple enough, but to do it on acres and acres of plants is another matter. Because of the kneeling position it requires, the knees are the first blood it draws but tender young hands are soon blistered and muscles ache from the awkward position required.

Noon time mercifully comes and talk of quitting by some and all of us at least thinking about it. Somehow, we all managed to get through the afternoon but the bus that was abuzz in the morning is now more subdued. I had fared better than most because setting pins all winter toughened me up some, but my knees were a bloody mess. After getting off the bus at the North End, while walking, I thought about relieving my knees some and from our rag bag found some that were long enough to tie around my knees for work. I then sat down at the supper table with my family, which is also where I awoke at 5:30 a.m. in time to do it all again.

That second day was so different from the first. For one thing, there were less busses and I'm sure that Sumatra knew from previous years that over half the kids would quit after that first day. By Friday the suckering was over and first picking started for the 33 of us who were left out of the original 138. Though still blistered and sore kneed, this crew would make it intact to the end of the season.

FIRST PICKING

First picking entailed picking the bottom four leaves of each plant as you moved down the row until you had a dozen or more in each hand which you then would put together in a little pile or "pad" as it was called and place it in between the plants for the "dragger". Since first picking was still an on your knees job, those of us who had

to pick were envious of the kids who were chosen as draggers. Eventually we realized the draggers were chosen because they were the slowest pickers. By this time we were all hardened off enough to handle a very difficult job with a lot less discomfort.

We often had another crew working nearby that we called the P.A.'s. Naturally, they were from Pennsylvania. They were a little older, (16-18), and enjoyed harassing us younger kids but we had protectors in the form of Jamaican men who worked in supporting jobs. We grew to love these Jamaicans, not only because they saved our necks, but also because of their personalities. Art, one of our favorites, had been an RAF pilot during the war and had four children in Jamaica and showed us pictures of them along with one of him in his flight suit next to his fighter plane. Spencer was another favorite because of his laid-back style. He was about 6'6" tall, very skinny and limber. He drove the tractor that hauled the rectangular, steeled-framed canvas baskets that held the pads to the curing sheds. Spencer seemed to move in slow motion and even the other Jamaicans laughed when he was around. He always had a broad smile and while he moved slow, he was like many of those relaxed people that do a good days work by not wasting motion. The last Jamaican I am going to describe was looked at with great awe. I don't think that any of us actually knew his real name, we simply called him "Mighty." He had a very small wasp-like waistline topped by the most beautiful physique I've ever seen in my 75 years. Now I have seen bulkier builds than his but none with the symmetry. He didn't talk much but any time he saw us smaller kids being bullied, he would wag his finger at the offender and the bullying would stop.

We were all relieved when second picking started because the leaves were now high enough to be picked from a crouch position. Also, we started to work Saturdays and our first 6-day pay contained a raise from 55 to 65 cents per hour. In those days, tax took such a small percentage, we ended up just short of \$30 that week. While all this brought our spirits up, it was still hellish work with afternoons often in the high 90's. In fact, one afternoon after a lunchtime thunder shower, the sun came out with a vengeance and when it was time to pick, we all decided we didn't want to go into those steamy fields. We started chanting "It's too wet!!!" and refused to work. We caused enough of a stir for the big boss to come and lecture us about how all the other boys were working in the other fields so our insurrection was soon over. We still ended up picking the same amount of bends. Our straw bosses, Ivan and Warren, weren't too happy about our little stunt and were a little nasty the rest of the afternoon because we had made them look bad. By the following day, everything was back to normal and we all understood that there was a specific amount of work to be done by us and they usually treated us pretty well. The company knew exactly how many bends a day a worker should produce. (A bend was the distance between two of the poles supporting the nets).

As the summer progressed, the worked seemed a little easier. Some of it was because our bodies had toughened up and some of it was because we went on to fourth and fifth picking which were stand-up jobs and not too uncomfortable. In fact, we thought we were going to get a little time off before school when we were hired out to another company to help with their harvest. Their crew was from Hartford and almost the same size as ours and all black. While we did have two blacks in our crew, there was a little tension for a few minutes but after a little joking around we all relaxed, after all, we were all in the same boat. The new fields were in Granby and the type of shade grown was much easier to pick, even better we were paid piece-work and worked

Saturday the last two weeks. As near as I can remember, my last two checks were around \$36 (big bucks for a 14 year old).