

THE FIRE-CURED LEAF

Helen Brewer

During the early twentieth century tobacco was the most important cash crop of farmers in Graves County. It permitted the indebted farmer to buy Christmas presents if sold in December and later to pay his debts in addition to buying other needed articles for his family. Mayfield was one of the large centers in Western Kentucky for the handling of dark-fired tobacco, and as such we who lived there were affected by the leaf, some more than others.

The warehouses were located in the vicinity of North Twelfth Street, a few blocks from our father's coal office and shop on West Broadway. As children the district became familiar to us, for we often walked to town or made trips to see our father. When the market opened, we were very much aware of farmers, their wagons loaded with tobacco, going to the warehouses. The driver was always accompanied by a companion to help with the team of horses or mules; and to protect the tobacco from the elements a tarpaulin, secured to the corners of the wagon, covered the load. In crisp, cold weather we could smell the aroma of tobacco for blocks.

On busy days farmers coming from both directions, east and west, lined up on Broadway, waiting their turn to enter the chute on Twelfth Street, where tobacco was sold. Inside the narrow frame building buyers for companies examined the loads and made their bids, as the auctioneer chanted the prices. When the tobacco was sold, the farmer moved on to the purchaser's barn, and there it was unloaded, graded, and packed in hogsheds, ready for shipment by rail.

Sometimes buyers walked along the line of waiting wagons and pulled "hands" of tobacco from a load to sample, then tossed the leaves on top of the load or carelessly threw them on the brick street. As soon as the area was cleared of farmers, wagons, and buyers, teen-age boys scurried to the once-occupied place and grabbed the leaves to take home. After acquiring 30 to 40 pounds, they sold the amount to local agents for pocket money. Since dark tobacco has a heavier taste than burley, it was used for snuff and chewing tobacco, not cigarettes, which would soon dominate the market. We were told that exporters bought the leaf for manufacturers in Spain and Africa.

Over a period of years we visited relatives who lived on a farm east of town and there learned about farm life and the growing of tobacco. Our first trips were made in a horse-drawn buggy and later in a Model-T Ford. Over the rough country road filled with ruts and potholes neither traveled very fast; consequently we knew every turn in the road and did not measure distance by miles but by a farm house, a rickety wooden bridge, a small white frame church, and a settlement with a store and several farm houses. In the summer groves of trees - oak, hickory, and sweet gum formed a backdrop for the long stretches of well-kept rows of young tobacco plants as they grew tall in the hot summer sun. On small farms the owners did most of the

back-breaking work from the time of the sowing of the plant and in the spring to the curing of the tobacco.

In the early autumn the mature stalks were cut and housed in a tall, narrow barn. Five or six stalks were placed on tobacco sticks and hung in tiers as high as the rafters. A fire of hickory or other hardwood, centered on the floor and covered with sawdust, gave a glaze and special flavor to the leaf. It was not unusual to see piles of wood and sawdust outside near the barn door on many farms and smell the acrid smoke from the flameless fire. The fire-cured process took several weeks and required constant supervision, for a flying spark could spell disaster for the farmer. Finally the leaves were stripped from the stalk and tied in "hands" of eight to ten leaves. Men in the neighborhood helped each other with the hanging and stripping; even women in the family often times joined the group in the stripping room.

On farms with large tobacco acreage and other crops the owner often times hired a tenant farmer or sharecropper to work the land for a part of the value of the crops. Like most farmers his earnings were small, and hoping to improve his lot, he moved from place to place every few years after the tobacco season was over in December or January. At that time of year we were never surprised to meet a sharecropper and his family as they drove along the road, their few belongings piled on a wagon, while their children stood or sat behind them and underneath one or two dogs kept pace with the moving horses.

Our father bought and sold tobacco for a short time but the industry was not his main interest. Living in our section of town, however, were two men who were involved in the tobacco market. One was recognized as the most knowledgeable buyer in the area. The erratic market brought good years and bad years. It was said at the time that he made as much as \$19,000 in one season, which was a lot of money then, but the next year could be disastrous. During the good times the parents indulged their large families with expensive toys and trips as well as a pony and two-wheeled cart and a car to use freely. A cook, employed full time, permitted the mother to visit our mother in the mornings when she was busy with household chores and preparing the noon meal. For our parents who did not believe in spending money needlessly, in time the situation became difficult, especially for our mother and for us too who could not understand why we were restrained from seeking daily entertainment. Only when their lean years arrived did we fully appreciate our parents good judgment.

Among the few men who had acquired modest wealth in the tobacco industry in Mayfield, one was well-known to our family. We called him an oddball, but the more mature person characterized him as an individualist. He liked to sit on the front porch with his feet propped on the balustrade, while he read the **Mayfield Messenger**. In our young minds such an act was improper, to say the least. Several times a week he walked briskly from his home to our father's coal office with his collar in one hand and tie in the other. On those mornings while the Brewer boys watched in silent amuse-

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hands and all other skaters were warned to beware of the formidable line. There was always an air of expectancy that we might fall and of course we did, but sprawling on the floor was not a good reason for stopping. We got up, brushed our clothes, and skated until time to go home. Soon commercial rinks under tents sprang up in the summer, but somehow they were not the same. We had devised our own sport held in a special place which we had selected and skated with young people our age. In another setting overshadowed by commercialism the magic of skating was gone.

We had grown up during the troubled years of the dark-fired tobacco industry when farmers were pitted against the tobacco trust. In a subtle way and without our awareness so, too, had the dark leaf touched our young lives.