

Ellis, Jim: Putting In Tobacco ^[1]

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Jim Ellis: Putting In Tobacco

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I visited with Jim Ellis in Fountain, a small town 70 miles east of Raleigh. A retired tobacco farmer and country preacher, he grew up there between the two largest tobacco markets in the world, Greenville and Wilson. When he was a boy, he told me, "Everybody we knew was a tobacco farmer."

For all the hardships and uncertainty of raising tobacco, most older farmers recall at least harvest-time with an enduring fondness. In the days before tractors and mechanical harvesters, the tobacco harvest brought together family and neighbors, young and old, town and country cousins, for five or six weeks every summer. It was hard, hot work, but it was also a time of visiting and fellowship.

Progress ended those summer gatherings, of course, but neither Ellis nor untold thousands of other people who worked in tobacco have forgotten them.

In Jim Ellis's words:

I probably started handing tobacco when I was 5 or 6 years old. Now, when I first started handing tobacco, I stood on the truck and handed, so I could reach the tobacco and reach the looper. That was the way people started. During the lunch we would have about three or four people to prime tobacco. They'd take two or three leaves off every stalk as they went through the field. When it got to the barn, the handers take it off three leaves at a time, bunch it together and hand it over. The folks that were handing, when they finished, they'd line up and get that tobacco out of the rack and pass it into the tobacco barn. Then a person would do what you call "poking it up." He'd hand it up to the first one on the tier. A man would. They'd start the wood furnace in the barn up that night or next morning first thing. They'd want to keep the temperatures about 90 degrees until the tobacco yellowed. Then they'd go to what they called "the raising the heat." They'd creep on up. If they put in on Monday, they probably turned the heat out of that barn Sunday morning. It would take nearly a week for curing. Then they'd open the doors on that barn, and the moisture in the air would let it what we call "come in order." They'd have it out of the barn and into the pack house in time to be in the field priming tobacco when it got light. They'd wake up at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. When the men got up, the women would cook breakfast and dinner. When the fall tobacco season was a celebratory thing almost. Everybody was carried to the barn. There was nobody left at the house, unless they were so old or sick they couldn't get there. Right on down to the babies - if they were in the crib, they might. It was not unusual to have singing. They would sing hymns and they would sing popular songs and they would sing old songs. They'd sing "The Old Rugged Cross" and they'd sing "In the Sweet Bye and Bye." At about that time, they were still. Nobody had a time clock. Most of the time, they didn't even keep up with the time they went to work. Now in later years, they did. But in the old days, you swap work. If you went down there and helped somebody put in tobacco, if it took you a week. After World War II, they got to curing more with oil. After a while, we started using a looping machine. Then the bulk barns came in. They started having a riding machine, a two-story harvester. Now days, I don't imagine you can find a person. They also quit using mules and started using tractors. But I bet you that the great majority of those mules died in the lot. They didn't sell them, because them mules were members of the family. They had names just like the young'uns. Out on a farm. Used to be, a family would have three, four, five acres of tobacco at the most. Now, if a person farming doesn't have 40 to 80 acres, they don't think they can make a go of it, because they have so much money invested in the mechanical harvester. Some of those folks started getting jobs in town, and in the mills. The farm economy was a stay-at-home economy. You didn't spend a lot, you didn't go a lot and you didn't do a lot. Your main thing was, you had a place to stay, clothes to wear. Everybody used to be farming.

Now, if you ride through my country out there, there's not a tobacco farmer out there.

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