

## **HATFIELD TOBACCO (1950s – 1960s)** **by Bob Omasta**

The Tobacco Road leads into and out of Hatfield. It is 7:10 AM and my brother Ron and I are waiting alongside North Hatfield Road – lunch pails in hand – waiting on the “Cootie Wagon” to pick us up. The pickup truck with an enclosed bed and wooden benches along the sides, usually driven by John Cernack, has already been through Bradstreet and down Depot Road, picking up the Malloy girls, the Kakuchka boys, and Bernie Wozniak among others before it stops for us. It continues into Hatfield center where it brings us to the Billie Wilkes Farm, part of the Meyer & Mendelsohn Company.

The work day is from 07:30 to 4:30 pm, Monday thru Saturday for a total of 54 hours a week. Because of the agricultural work rules, kids 14 years of age and up were able to be hired. Pay for new hires started at 60 to 65 cents per hour with raises of 5 to 10 cents for subsequent years. Some other companies paid workers based on a piece-meal scale.

There are numerous time-consuming and labor-intensive steps to planting, growing / nurturing and harvesting tobacco:

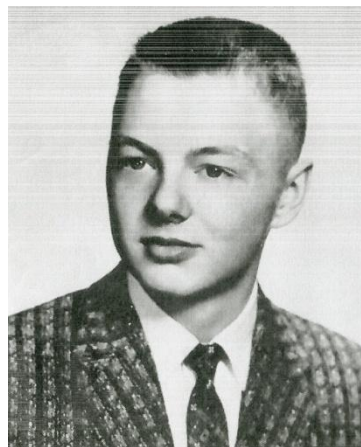
Early in the growing season, we would then be driven by vintage school buses to the fields or tobacco barns to start the initial tasks: preparing bundles of lathe – 50 to a bundle, re-setting the poles on each tier, raking and cleaning the barns.

The fields (hundreds of acres) required the cheese cloth netting to be draped and secured over the wires and 8’ poles. Huge bundles of netting were brought in by truck and wagon to cover the many acres of each field.

Once the tobacco was planted some plants would need to be replaced due to cutworms, grubs, dry soil, broken stems, etc. As the plants mature and grow, hoeing is required to keep each plant upright and straight. Once the plants are about knee high, twine is tied to each plant and the other end to the wire running parallel to the row at the top of the poles by a large crew of mainly teenage boys and girls.

Tobacco grows rapidly, so just before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July the 1<sup>st</sup> picking would begin. This is where the real “dirty work” starts. Because of the extensive labor requirements -- by now the local work crews were augmented by teen boys and girls from Tennessee and/or Pennsylvania along with a number of workers from the Caribbean Islands. They were provided room and board in facilities run by each tobacco company.

The first picking was the hardest and the dirtiest. (Mothers must have cringed when their kid (s) came home.) Crews were broken down into teams of two pickers and a hauler. The pickers would have to sit down between the rows (each picker picking from the row to his left and right) and scoot along on their bottom while picking off 2 or 3 of the largest leaves from each tobacco



Bob Omasta SA Yearbook photo

plant. After gathering several leaves in each hand, the pickers would stack them along the row for the hauler to pick up and place in the canvas basket with skids. The hauler used a wire hook with a wooden handle to tow the basket along. When the basket was filled the hauler would drag it back to the end of the row, grab an empty basket and head back to retrieve the stacks of tobacco leaves the pickers had picked. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> picking the pickers would be able to move down the rows on their knees. Then eventually they would be able to stand up and move along even faster - leaving the hauler "in the dust" and hustling to stay caught up.



"Sewing" leaves together on a tobacco machine called a twister. Image photographed and donated by Joe Baceski Jr.

The canvas baskets filled with the tobacco leaves would be hauled by a vehicle with a customized bed to a tobacco barn where a crew of mostly teenage girls would "sew" the leaves onto the wooden lathes. Each sewing team was comprised of 3 people: a girl on each side of the sewing machine and a 3<sup>rd</sup> girl to unpack the tobacco leaves from the baskets and stack them onto the table so each of the sewers would be able to continuously feed the leaves into the twisting string and secure it to the lathe. The filled lathes would then be collected and handed up each tier and hung on the poles until the barn was filled.

This process would go on all summer until around Labor Day which signaled the end of the full-time work and back to school for the students. This is how a great many teens from Hatfield and the surrounding communities spent their summer vacations.

## **PRANKS**

- Many frogs, toads, snakes, turtles, lizards, etc. were tucked into the leaves within the tobacco baskets. The boys in the field could almost hear the girls scream and shout when they discovered the hidden creatures. One time, one of the smaller boys was placed into the covered basket and sent into the barn to really surprise the unsuspecting girls.
- While we were working the fields along Route 5 & 10, we would have out of state tourists stop by to inquire what type of plants were growing in the fields. With a sense of sophomoric humor, we would tell them that this is New England sugar cane. Then we would take out a small plant from the end of the row to give to them. As they drove away, we would laugh as we imagined them tasting the bitter tobacco plant.
- In the fields at lunch time, it would not be unusual to discover that the lettuce in your sandwich had been swapped with a small tobacco leaf.

While working in tobacco was hot, dirty, and sweaty and a great way to get a tan, it was also provided a way to develop social skills while interacting with your peers from nearby towns. There was a lot of flirting going on between the guys in the field and the girls in the barn but there were more sparks than fire. At the end of the day, you were too tired to do much else and most of the kids did not have a car.

The one day that stands out is the day we were working in a particularly large and long field. We still had about a quarter of the row to go when we heard a plane circling overhead. It was the crop-duster who had begun his run spraying a wide swath of dust which quickly enveloped us. Our field bosses just said to keep going so we could finish the rows were on. (This was well before the E.P.A. & OSHA)

## **LIFE AFTER TOBACCO**

I attended Norwich University in Northfield, VT (the nation's oldest private military school and the birthplace of ROTC -- Reserve Officer Training Corps. With me were my Smith Academy (Class of 1962) classmates, Marty Wilkes and Bob Petrick.

Graduating in 1966 with a degree in Business Administration and commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Army, I then attended the Armored Officer Course at Fort Knox, KY. Upon completion of the course, I was assigned for a three-year tour in Germany with the 14th Armored Cavalry Squadron in Bad Hersfeld, and also with the 24th Infantry Division in Munich.

After Germany, I was sent to Vietnam (Sept 1968 – Oct 1969) assigned to the MACV Advisory Team 51 (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) in Bac Lieu (in the Mekong Delta). I served as the G-2 Air advisor to the ARVN 21 Infantry Division providing and coordinating aerial reconnaissance & surveillance and intelligence to prepare and conduct operational missions.

Surviving Vietnam, my next assignment was in Washington, D.C., where I was an imagery analyst and intelligence officer with the Defense Intelligence Agency for three years. My last active-duty

tour --after completing 3 weeks of airborne training at Fort Benning, GA -- was at Fort Bragg, NC. I was a detachment commander in the 513th Military Intelligence Battalion (Aerial Reconnaissance & Surveillance). I then left the active army and joined the Army reserves, eventually retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel with over 20 years of military service.

In 1976 I became a Department of Defense civilian with the Defense Intelligence Agency and then with the National Geospatial-intelligence Agency before retiring in 2007. My roles and career progressed from being an imagery analyst, to a branch manager, and as an international policy staff officer.

### **WHAT WORKING IN TOBACCO DID FOR ME**

First the obvious -- it provided a good source of income to cover summer fun activities and instituted a good savings plan to use the money throughout the rest of the year.

Working in the field with others offered a primer course for personnel management and developing leadership skills. There were many opportunities to be a "straw boss" and to be responsible for getting a task accomplished with a small team (e.g. bundling lathe, covering fields with cheesecloth, cultivating, setting up the sewing machines, maintaining the charcoal pans, etc.). You learned how to operate large farm equipment (tractors, irrigation pumps, etc.). While compliments and rewards were uncommon, the work fostered a sense of pride, self-confidence and responsibility.

*--Bob Omasta (Smith Academy, 1962)  
South Riding, VA*

*To see some photos of harvesting broadleaf field tobacco on the Mike and Nellie Omasta farm in North Hatfield, click [HERE](#).*