

Working days at M&M Tobacco

By Carol Godek Lekoski

My name is Carol Godek. I am 14 years old, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York.

In between finishing grade school and starting high school in July of 1954, my life changed from urban (asphalt, tar, and cement) to rural (greens, flowers, and crops).

Right out of grammar school, I started dying my hair blonde, was very much into make-up, clothes, and high heels and, little did I know, this was going to be short-lived.

My mom took ill that summer, and I was sent to live with my mom's family in Hatfield, MA. There, my Aunt Stella Kirejczyk was supervisor of M&M Tobacco Co. [Meyer & Mendelsohn], and she had a crew of local teens working the fields in various jobs to get the tobacco ready for the curing process, which took place in the barns. The rest of the family figured I needed to do something for the summer so, in a matter of a few days, I was off to work with that crew.

My job was to tie the small tobacco plants to the high wires under the cheesecloth to keep them erect and safe from the elements: hail, wind, rain and storms. The process of tying was to tape every finger of both hands so that you were able to pull the string apart after tying each plant across the whole row, one row after another, and again as the plants grew. We went back into the fields to twist the strings to keep the plants tight and upright, repeating until each plant rose to its desired height. Pulling these strings day after day left your fingers irritated, bloody and blistered. This constant pulling was something short of extremely painful and barbaric.

After all this, the second part of the job was to sew the tobacco leaves two-by-two on huge machines. The sun was hot and, instead of wearing make-up and having pretty hair, I was wiping the sweat off my brow and my head.

After working in the fields, next was working in the barns, which were dark, dreary, and cold. I thought, "What did I get myself into?" It was anything but glamorous.

Working at M&M, I met a local teen, Rose Kovalski, who became my partner in crime, and showed me the ropes. She introduced me to everyone and allowed me to become part of the crew instead of being just an outsider.

So, there I was getting down, dirty and sweaty – a far cry from coiffed hair, make-up and fashionable clothes and stiletto heels. My new



Rose Kovalski (Mulherin), senior photo, 1958 Carol Godek (Lekoski), senior photo, 1958

wardrobe consisted of cut-off dungaree shorts, sneakers, a hat, and kerchief or sometimes a bandana, to absorb the sweat and protect me from the elements. The barn wardrobe consisted of everything I just mentioned (minus the shorts) plus a flannel shirt and long dungarees to keep me warm. The hours were early and the work hard, but I began to love every minute of it, as Rosie helped to make it a fun time.

Our lunchtime consisted of eating, singing and blasting our radios with Paul Anka's "Diana," Pat Boone's "Love Letters in the Sand," etc., and watching the boys! We knew that the out-of-town and local boys were working in the fields and every so often we'd go and catch a glimpse of them. It proved we were still giddy teen girls interested in boys, which always added to the excitement of the day.

When we got off the bus that transported us to the barn to start work, we'd run to get the first sewing machines by the entrance of the barn so we could see the outside and get some fresh air and sunlight amid the darkness.

We sewed the tobacco leaves two-by-two, Rosie on one side of the machine, and me on the other. The leaves were sewn together then slid on long sticks called laths and then hung by the adults in the barns for the process of curing and drying over the summer. Then they were made into cigars and cigarettes at the manufacturing facility.

I made \$.65 an hour for an eight-hour day/40-hour week – a whopping \$26 a week. A great salary for a 14-year-old, I thought. To me and Rosie, it was good money.

Every pay day, Rosie and I would walk to the nearest big town, Northampton, to spend some of our earnings. At least our hair and make-up looked presentable and we enjoyed getting all dolled up for the walk.

I had this work routine for the next three summers, until I was 17, and then returned back to urban living in Brooklyn, where I spent the rest of my days, always visiting Hatfield, yearly.

Now, 64 years later, at 78 years old, I still look back at these times with fond memories and am happy to say that Rosie and I are still good friends, and we still reminisce about our working days at M&M Tobacco Co.

When I tell my children and grandchildren this story, they look at me like I lost my mind. They cannot understand how I could be



Friends for life, Rose (Kovalski) Mulherin and Carol (Godek) Lekoski, meeting up at Fishtales Bar and Grill in Hatfield in 2015. They met working tobacco for M&M in the 1950s.

happy and have fun, working in that kind of environment – in the hot sun, for such little pay. Would I do it again? Absolutely, in a heartbeat!

Carols' Addendum

After my three-year stint (1954-1957) on the tobacco fields of Hatfield, MA, donned in my famous Daisy-Mae wardrobe, September 1958 came around. I was then 18 years old and back in Brooklyn, NY. Since I recently graduated high school, it was time for me to get a job.

I landed one at the prestigious firm of Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc. on Wall Street in New York City. WOW!!! My job there was an administrative assistant to three stockbrokers in their no-nonsense, conservative, button-down shirts and three-piece blue suits. I could now get back into my glamorous city attire, which was the bleach blonde hair, make-up, and high heels. I was able to travel by subway to my job in style and comfort. The offices were big, colorful, and air-conditioned, with posh carpeting as far as the eye could see – a far cry from the crops, dirt, and heat of M&M's vast tobacco fields.

In between this time, I got married in September of 1960 and stayed employed until I gave birth to identical twin girls in June of 1963.

The rural job at M&M and the urban job at Merrill Lynch were as different as day was to night. Both left their marks on my life, but working for M&M left the biggest, deepest and fondest of memories.
