Proud to Be

# A Third-Generation Tobacco Worker

by Karen Gutfinski Corell

My grandfather Andrew Gutfinski worked in the tobacco fields. His son, my father, never spoke much about his parents, but he did tell me that as a young boy he used to bring lunch to his father out in the fields. Andrew was an immigrant from Szczepanowice, Poland, had come to the U.S. after ten years in the Austrian army, and worked as a farm laborer until he purchased his own home and grew onions as a sharecropper.

Andrew and Antonina Gutfinski at their home at 114 Elm Street in Hatfield. The photo was taken in 1936.

My grandmother, Antonina Kuraś Gutfinski, Andrew's wife, worked in the tobacco barns in the winter to make extra money to support the family — my father, his brother, and their six sisters. One of her jobs, as my father described it to me, was to sort the cured tobacco leaves by size. This was done by holding each leaf by the tip and by the stem end and sliding it along a row of narrow openings of increasing lengths until the leaf reached a slit that matched its length. Then the leaf would be dropped through the opening into a bin below. Antonina was an immigrant from Łętowice, Poland, and in the summer supervised her family's work in the onion fields.

My father, Leon W. Gutfinski, once begrudgingly acknowledged that he too worked in the tobacco fields, but he would not tell me more. He worked in the family's onion fields from a young age and was not happy to talk about the physical labor he was forced to do.

Alexander Donnis inspecting his tobacco crop, in the late 1920s.

My mother's father, my grandfather Alexander Donnis, grew field tobacco. His main business was the Donnis Lumber Company, which had offices and a mill on Elm Street. However, he had an entrepreneurial spirit and raised tobacco on the side. His son, my uncle Bernard Donnis, told me that Alexander would routinely appear in his tobacco fields just before quitting time to coax his workers to finish planting/weeding/cutting one more row before they left for the day. "Come on, boys, one more row," he would say. Alexander and his wife, my grandmother Josephine Kurcaba Donnis, were both born in Jelna, Poland.

When I was fourteen I wanted to work 'on tobacco' too. I had no idea of my family's history with tobacco farming, so I was very upset when my father declared that under no circumstances would his daughter do farm labor. Of course I realize now that he was spending long days at his auto body company to ensure that I would not have to work as hard as he had, but at the time I was devastated. Luckily, however, my mother understood that work could be fun and could provide a social life for her only child.

Before we reached the age of sixteen, farm work and babysitting were the only two opportunities for work — or any daytime activities — for us teenagers, and babysitting didn't appeal to me. At sixteen I left the fields and became a clerk at Stewart's College Town Shop, a clothing store on Main Street.

Alexander and Josephine Donnis at their home at 131 Prospect Street in Hatfield. The photo was taken in the 1950s.

I worked for the Zgrodnik Tobacco Company for two summers, in 1965 and 1966. The Zgrodnik bus would pick me up at the end of my street in Florence at 6 a.m. and deposit me back there at 6 p.m. That was a long day for a fourteen-year-old. Nevertheless, it was fun to work and to be with my friends, although on a couple of occasions I was so exhausted that I took a day off and slept most of the day.

The boys worked in the fields. For the first few weeks they removed the suckers from the plants and twisted a taut vertical string, attached to a wire running the length of the row, around the stalk of each plant to support it as it grew tall. For most of the summer, the boys picked the leaves.

My future husband, Tom Corell, also from Florence, worked for the Blauvelt farm for two summers and had first-hand experience of how nasty the working conditions were in the steamy climate under the cheesecloth. The conditions were an improvement over picking cucumbers, however— which required bouncing on one's stomach on the rickety wooden platforms suspended on both sides of an old truck while reaching for cucumbers under the prickly leaves. Tom lasted only two days in the cucumber fields.

**In this photo of the Sheehan tobacco farm warehouse, taken in the 1920s, Mr. Sheehan is standing at the top right. Clementine Donnis, daughter of Alexander Donnis, is seated in the first row wearing a white blouse, to the right of the little girl.**

1

2

3

4

**It wasn't until I visited Cuba in 2017 that I watched this demonstration of how cigars are made by hand and understood the role of these special leaves. 1) Three leaves are bunched together and wrapped with a fourth to create the core of the cigar. 2) and 3) The core is skillfully wrapped with a strip hand cut from a leaf of the highest quality. 4) Finished cigars.**

The cheesecloth-covered 'shade-grown' tobacco was very valuable for making top quality cigars. (It is different from the 'field grown' tobacco that Alexander Donnis grew.) We were told that the leaves were used as cigar wrappers, but we were never told more than that.

Obviously it was, and is, quite an expensive, labor-intensive process to grow this specialized crop. The entire fields were covered with yellow or white cheesecloth that draped over the edges of the field sealing in the humidity and protecting the delicate leaves from sun scorching. The top of the cheesecloth was well over the heads of anyone walking underneath, but by late summer some hearty plants would force their flowering tops through the fabric.

The leaves were picked by hand one at a time and prepared for curing. Curing was the process of drying the leaves just the right amount under just the right conditions. They hung in the barns throughout the fall, heated by propane heaters if needed, until they were light brown, paper thin, and quite pliable and elastic. Then they were graded and bundled for sale.

The barns, which used to be ubiquitous in Hatfield, Hadley, Whately, and other towns in the Connecticut Valley, were conveniently built right in the middle of the tobacco fields. They were long and narrow unpainted buildings with large doors at either end for easy access. The sides were built with ground-to-roof skinny doors that could be opened on hinges to allow cross ventilation.

During the devastating 1938 hurricane, which flattened many barns and trees throughout the valley, my grandfather Alexander Donnis was called to action to process the fallen timber at his lumber company and supervise its transformation into rebuilt barns.

We girls worked in those dark and dusty barns preparing the leaves for curing.

Six-feet-tall sewing machines, looking like giant Erector sets, lined one wall of whatever barn we were working in. I was assigned a place at one of them, standing and facing another girl on the other side of the machine. Our job was to 'sew' the tobacco leaves onto white twine enabling them to be suspended from a yardstick-like 'lath' and hung in the rafters of the barn for drying.

This is how it worked:

White canvas baskets full of tobacco leaves (which had been filled by the boys in the field) would be placed at the end of our machine by a girl assigned to that role. I would remove a stack of leaves from the basket and arrange it in two piles face down on the table in front of me, stem ends facing each other, each pile about eight inches high.

**We were frequently reminded to not ever puncture the surface of the leaves, because that would reduce their value.**

My muscle memory from those two summers is such that I can still go through the motions of sewing the leaves with no involvement from my brain. Because my brain isn't involved I may be mistaken about some of these details, but this is my memory of the process.

Step one: Grab a lath from an upright bin of fifty laths.

Step two: Insert one end of the twine into a slit at the end of the lath and wrap the string around the end a few times to secure it. The twine was unspooled from a ten-inch-high cone of white string that sat on a spindle at the top of the machine.

Step three: Place the string-wrapped end of the lath into a holder at the far left side of the sewing machine and cut the string to be a foot or so longer than the lath, on a stationary blade attached to the machine.

Step four: Insert the free end of the string into a slit in the machine's needle.

Step five: Pick up a leaf in each hand by gently grasping its raised spine.

Holding a leaf in each hand, lift the pair of leaves up to the needle of the machine. I can't remember how the three-inch-long needle actually pierced the short stems of the leaves or how

we activated the machines, but I do remember that there was a mechanism in place to prevent us from injuring ourselves on the needle. One girl did, however, manage to send her finger through her needle.

The leaves somehow traversed across the point of the needle, moving from right to left, and slid off the far edge of the needle to dangle from the twine. Finger-like wires pushed each pair of leaves along the length of the twine until forty-eight pairs filled the string, evenly spaced across its length.

Step six: Remove the string from the slit at the end of the needle, insert it into the slit on the unbound end of the lath, and wrap it around a few times for safety.

Step seven: Place the lath with the suspended leaves on a rack attached to the side of the barn to the operator's left. I always stood at the side of the machine that moved the leaves from right to left, but the girl on the other side would have reversed the movements, left to right.

**That sap would coat our hands with sticky black tar. Our arm hairs were 'enhanced' as if we had applied layers of mascara.**

The men who worked in the barn then grabbed the laths hung with leaves and passed them one at a time up to their colleagues standing on the barn's rafters above them. The team started at the top of the barn laying the laths across the barn's framework. Forty-eight pairs of leaves dangled from each lath, lath after lath, for the whole length and width of the barn. The men worked their way down from the top rafters completely filling each level until the entire barn was full. Then all the equipment was moved to another barn and the tobacco bus would drive us to the new location.

The workers were often young Puerto Rican men who took the job for the summer to earn extra money for their families back in Puerto Rico. Our local young men had a teasing relationship with them. I remember one Puerto Rican man who was nicknamed Tony-with-the-Twenty-Two-Inch-Arms because he liked to lift weights and had enormous biceps.

The days started out quite chilly and we all wore several layers of clothing, usually two flannel shirts on top of a sleeveless blouse. As the day progressed we removed the flannel shirts one after another.

When the boys working in the field removed their flannel shirts mid-morning, the shirts were so encrusted with the sap of the tobacco plants that they could stand up by themselves at the end of the rows.

The highlight of our day was lunch, when we could sit around together eating the sandwiches we had brought. On extremely hot days our 'straw boss' would come around to pass out salt tablets to compensate for the sweat we lost in the heat. One day it was so hot that we were sent home early. As I was waiting in the old school bus, which had been sitting in the mid day sun, I remember promising myself, "I will never be cold again." It was so, so hot.

**I was earning $1.10 per bundle. My average pay was $8.10 a day.**

Many teens had their first smoking experience during those summers. One of the boys' pranks was to close all the windows in the bus and fill it with smoke, just to provoke the driver and foremen.

We were paid piecework for each bundle of fifty laths that we filled. When we finished each bundle, our straw boss would verify its completion and note it in her records. I usually finished between seven and eight bundles a day.

**My father, Leon Gutfinski, circa 1929, with a tobacco barn in the background.**

Tom's pay for picking leaves was nine cents a bin. A bin was the length of a row between two of the poles supporting the cheesecloth. The job entailed picking the lowest (and largest) three leaves of each tobacco plant, placing them carefully in a canvas basket, and dragging the full basket to the end of the row. The load in each basket was scrutinized for care in handling — to ensure there were no holes punched in the leaves, that they weren't packed too tightly, etc.

Early in the season the picking necessitated dragging one's rear end along the rows to pick the leaves at the bottom of the plants. Later, it required bending over at a back-breaking angle and, by the end of the summer, stretching overhead to reach the top of the plant.

Tom recalls weekly paychecks of $10 to $14 and occasionally up to $40. He agrees with me that if you didn't have fun working with your friends it wouldn't have been worth it.

At the end of my second summer I used my earnings to buy a red-and-white Fender electric guitar and an 18-inch-high amplifier. We were all Beatles fans, of course. I learned how to play that guitar but discovered that I have no musical talent. Fortunately my father was a forward-thinking man — he opened a bank account in my name and deposited the exact amount of my earnings.

Looking back after fifty-five years, I see that what I learned from my tobacco days benefited me for my entire life. I learned that work can provide fun, rewarding social opportunities to meet people I never would have otherwise met. The daily satisfaction of setting and meeting a production goal gave me confidence and a positive, rather than a negative, view of hard work. I realized that I was indeed capable of joining the adult workforce and earning my own living.

**My grandparents Andrew and Antonina Gutfinski were included in this photo of the employees of Whalen's tobacco-sorting shop. Andrew, standing, is the fourth man from the right in the third row from the front, the man with a bushy moustache wearing bib overalls. His wife is kneeling in front of him, the third person from the right in the second row.**