

Hatfied in the 1950s by Edward Godek (Brooklyn, NY)

My Memories

Working on the Tobacco Fields: My first farm job was working for my Uncle George and Aunt Mary Vachula in 1954. Private farmers like my grandfather Joseph Kirejczyk and my uncles Albert Kirejczyk and George Vachula grew a different type of tobacco called Havana, in open fields. It was harvested by chopping the entire plant at the core, which was then tied to horizontal poles and hung in the tobacco barns to dry. The workers were usually family and friends. At 12 years old, my job was to drive the tractor into the open fields and haul the tobacco leaves into the barns. I was paid 70 cents an hour. When I asked my Uncle George if I



Ed Godek with George Vachula Jr., 1954

was going to be trained, because I didn't know how to drive a tractor, he responded by saying, "What are you going to hit, the air?" So from then on, I was a tractor driver.

After the harvest was over and no more tobacco was being grown, the private farmers, including my uncles, either rented or sold their properties to the big tobacco companies, such as M&M [Meyer & Mendelsohn], that grew a different type of tobacco called "shade-grown."

Hence, my second farm job was for M&M Tobacco – Wilkes Division, where I picked tobacco in the summer of 1956 and 1957. Picking tobacco at M&M started from July 4 through Labor Day, Mondays to Fridays, 8 am to 4 pm. Each field went through seven pickings about a week apart. The first two pickings you scooted along on your butt, picking the lower leaves. The next two pickings you were on your knees, and the balance of the pickings you had

to stand. Most mornings, you worked through muddy fields, and the rest of the day, you worked under the cheesecloth-covered fields through 90- to 100-degree temperatures. Under the cheesecloth, it was 10 degrees hotter than the outside temperature. The working conditions were grueling to say the least.

After the picking was done, I also had to haul the leaves in canvas baskets to trucks or flatbed trailers, which would bring them to barns where the girls sewed the leaves to wooden slats, which were hung in the barns to be dried.

M&M also hired a group of Pennsylvania boys to work the fields. They were paid and also received room and board at UMass in Amherst.

M&M sold the crop to Bayuk of Philadelphia, the manufacturer of Phillies Cigars.

Field Bosses at M&M: Bunny Jablonski and Tony Zembitski were in charge of the local boys, and Mike Filipek was in charge of the “Pensy” (short for Philadelphia) boys.

The BIG VIPs of M&M: Billy Wilkes and Joe Porada.

Good Times: The local haunt where we all hung out when not working was the pharmacy on Main Street, which had an ice cream and soda counter.

At least once a week after work, I would bike to South Deerfield to visit a friend from Brooklyn, [who was] also staying the summer with his grandparents.

I remember playing a baseball game between Northampton workers and Hatfield locals. The Hatfield team consisted of myself, Bobby Kovalski, Tack O’Dea, Ken Kulesza, Paul Labbee, George Poirier, David Byrne, John Vallania, and Joe Kalentek (we won 4-1).

Another memory was making fun out of an out-of-town worker Albert Backus from Skaneateles, NY. We all called him “Skinny Atlas.” It was also then that I experienced my first heart flutter. Her name was Cookie Bucala. She was a helper to the girls who were sewing the tobacco leaves. I just never had enough nerve to talk to her.

The Three County Fair in Northampton, which was held around Labor Day week, was the final conclusion to my summers of working on the tobacco fields. I enjoyed going very much, as the highlight for me was that it included a horse racing track.

The whole experience of working the fields for M&M was two of the best summers I will never forget. We had fun and got paid for it, too. I am now 78 years old and think about those days often with fond memories.

Landmarks I Remember

Main Street: Barber shop, U.S. post office, pharmacy, First National grocery store, Dr. Byrne’s home and office, and Holy Trinity Polish church.

School Street: Polish Club, Matt Klocko’s grocery store (aka Maciek’s), and Jiggs Bar & Grill.

Raymond Avenue: Pete Lizek’s grocery store.



Ed Godek, 2019

Elm Street: Henry Kugler's Hatfield Barn (a place for polka dancing).

Route 5-North Hatfield: Tom Labelle's Grinders stand.

In the woods off Prospect Street: Wilkie's Grove (a place where Polka dances were held on Sunday afternoons).

Both photos were taken at the Chestnut St. house of Ed's grandparents' – Josef and Amelia Kirejczyk. The 2019 photo was taken by Dianne Godek, Ed's wife.

Ed's Addendum

I graduated from Bishop Loughlin High School [in Brooklyn] in 1959 and graduated in 1961 from New York City Community College with an Associate's Degree in Construction Technology. I worked for various commercial interior contractors as an estimator and became Vice President of one of the companies. I worked on the Twin Towers, United Nations Building, and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, among many others. I retired in 2010.