

Three Summers, Three Companies: My Tobacco Industry Experience in Hatfield

By Jean (Klocko) Gromacki

In the 1950s the economy of the town was governed by the tobacco industry, which employed teenagers as young as 14 and many adults who left high school to work in all aspects of the industry. Many members of the same family would work in the tobacco industry and spend their entire lives working for three companies. After World War II, factory positions opened up in Greenfield, Holyoke and Springfield and attracted many adults to leave farm work and work in the cities.

In 1952 the major crop was tobacco. Many families grew onions, potatoes or broadleaf tobacco. Hundreds of [acres of] land was rented to large corporations. There were three major companies. Imperial Cigar was headed by George Zgrodnik and was located on Main St. behind his home; General Cigar was managed by John Zgrodnik and was located on Bridge St.; Meyer & Mendelsohn was headed by William Wilkes and was located on Elm St. These three companies cultivated hundreds of acres of "shade grown" -- called by this name because the tobacco plants were shaded by white cheese cloth and wire frames. These companies also rented hundreds of acres in Sunderland and Hadley. By May every year the landscape was changed to a field of white.

At 6:45 am, in the summer of 1952, a green rattling bus stopped at my home on Prospect St. [in Hatfield]. The bus was an old vintage school bus that had squeaky brakes, poor springs that did not hide the bumps in the road, and its maximum speed was probably only 30 miles per hour. When it stopped at my house it had already picked up girls from Whately and Deerfield. It continued over the Mill River Bridge toward the Imperial Company on Main St. That was the only company that hired 14 year olds, while the other companies hired 15 year olds.

My father encouraged me to try the job as it was a good learning experience. I was warned that the job was dirty, my clothes would be smelly after nine hours, and that there was no shady spot working under the cheese cloth canopy. My first job started around June 20 and was hoeing the small tobacco plants.

The job then changed to "tying" the small plants to a horizontal wire above each row of plants. At the end of the day hands were stained with tobacco juice and fingers were riddled with small lacerations. This job lasted about two weeks



Hoeing for weeds. Donated by Joseph Baceski.

when all the plants were tied and everyone benefited from a pay that came from the number of plants tied in a day of work called "piece work."

As soon as the leaves were 10 to 12 inches long, boys picked these leaves from the bottom of the plants. The leaves were gently placed in canvas baskets and collected by other boys. They then placed these baskets on old vehicles and brought [them] to the barns. Two local inventors -- Paul LeVitre and William Skorupski -- had refurbished old vehicles to carry rows of canvas baskets to the barns.



Baskets of leaves piled in the barn, ready for the sewers. Donated by Joseph Baceski

In the barns teenage girls and full-time adult women were waiting by the sewing machines to accept the leaves from the fields. The "pilers" took the leaves and positioned them where two sewers could feed the slow-moving machine that attached the leaves with string to a lat (a 3-foot long piece of wood 1-1/2 inches wide by 1/4 inches thick).

Again the sewers (older teenagers or adults), were paid by the number of lats that could be made, as the machine could be set from slow to fast speed. The lats were then taken by boys who placed them for drying in the barn. The jobs in the barn lasted until Aug. 15, when all the leaves were picked and the tobacco plants (now 6- to 8-ft tall) were standing like bare sticks in the field. The job ended just in time for the start of school; the sticky tobacco juice, stained hands and smelly clothes -- but also a stack of weekly checks -- were a reminder of a summer filled with memories of new friends and fun times.

The next summer I was able to work at the General Cigar Company because I was now 15 years old and could walk to the Bridge St. location, which was near my house. The next summer I joined the workers at M&M, which was the best company, and thus ended my tobacco career. It was a great learning experience.

During the winter the industry employed women to sort the dried leaves. The work started about Thanksgiving time in tobacco shops located near the major companies and in private farms like the Boyle and Kiley families in Hatfield, and the Decker family in Deerfield. The women worked in three categories: pilers, sorters, and collectors. They sorted the leaves according to color, size and texture. Hundreds of women worked until Easter and enjoyed



Sorting tobacco at #3 Meyer & Mendelsohn shop off Elm St., circa 1966-67. Second woman on left IDed as Helen (Kugler) Klocko, mother of author. Donor unknown but likely the Daily Hampshire Gazette.

sociability with friends and neighbors. Men were hired to pack and handle the heavy jobs in sending the harvest off to cigar factories. The harvest of the Hatfield fields was found to be of fine quality and texture for creating the wrappers of cigars.

The industry began to wane in the 1980s when the fertile valley land of Hatfield was returned to the raising of potatoes and other vegetables.

Jean Gromacki graduated from Smith Academy in 1955, and went on to pursue a career as a teacher and guidance counselor in the Greenfield Public Schools for about 25 years. When her children went to college, she changed fields and became a registered nurse, working in the Greenfield schools and at Franklin Medical Center during the summers.