

“Replacing” Tobacco on Kentucky Farms: Discourses of Tradition, Heritage, and  
Agricultural Diversification

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of  
Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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2009

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## ABSTRACT

Tobacco farms, once an icon of American history, are disappearing from the landscape. For the Kentucky tobacco growers who are the focus of this study, tobacco farming is a livelihood that involves a mastery of traditional skills passed through generations and adapted to changing circumstances—technological, economic, social, and political. In this project, I examine the consequences of the changing status of tobacco and the category “tobacco farmer,” both of which have become stigmatized because of the health effects of tobacco use.

This dissertation examines the current period of transition for Kentucky burley production and the implications for tobacco farmers of the changing contexts of this traditional occupation, often described as “a way of life.” The project is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Central Kentucky, supplemented by the collection of public discourses from multiple sites about tobacco production past and present. It brings folklore research and theory together with historical and archival research, economic data, and rhetorical analysis. In addition to a metahistory of tobacco production in the U.S. and Kentucky, and a fieldwork-based description of the 2007 crop-year, this dissertation examines the movement of the social and occupational category “tobacco farmer” from respect to stigma, and considers the repercussions of this movement on central folkloristic concepts, heritage and tradition.

I argue that institutional heritage discourses ushered tobacco into the past and contributed to the spread of the stigma from the industry to farmers, while expressions of vernacular heritage resist these results and argue “we’re still here.” A major focus of this dissertation is the gendered meanings of tobacco production. Men have had the primary multi-generational relationship with tobacco as a crop, a craft, and a source of occupational identity, through the traditionalized performance of the masculine identity of the *tobacco man*, which involves the mastery of particular knowledge and skills. It is men who are most (although not exclusively) involved in continuing the tradition. While women have always played important roles in the production of tobacco, as tobacco farming wanes, it is women who are often leading the way in efforts to move to alternative crops, expanding upon their traditional practices of selling farm products in order to supplement family income. “Diversification” discourses currently being deployed in Kentucky ignore both the confluence of economic and symbolic challenges that tobacco growers face when asked to “replace” tobacco, and the roles that women are playing in successful diversification efforts.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A doctoral dissertation cannot be completed without the input, support, and assistance of many individuals and institutions. This is especially true in the case of one based on ethnographic fieldwork with those who are the experts on the topic. I am grateful to the farmers and farm family members, tobacco warehousemen, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service personnel, and many others who so generously and graciously gave me their time and knowledge.

I also owe a great debt to the many individuals who introduced me to farmers in their communities, including Keenan Bishop (County Extension Agent for Agriculture and Natural Resources, Franklin County), Edwin Chavous (Small Farm Program Assistant, Franklin County), George Duncan (Professor Emeritus, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture), (Kara Keeton, Steve Moore (County Extension Agent for Agriculture and Natural Resources, Henry County), Carol Shutt, Charlene Smith (Kentucky Historical Society), and Diana Taylor.

I wish to thank my dissertation committee for their support throughout the completion of this project. I feel privileged to have worked with this amazing group of scholars through the completion of both my candidacy exams and this project.

Dorry Noyes listened to several early ideas as I searched for a dissertation topic; when I told her about the moment of inspiration during which I realized that tobacco production was the ideal topic, she enthusiastically agreed and has remained committed to the project ever since.

I had not previously been a student of Pat Mullen when I asked him to be a member of my committee, and yet he immediately made time to support and encourage me as I embarked on my fieldwork; he has remained a great source of support throughout.

Nan Johnson is a wonderful friend to the field of folklore, and from my first day in her graduate course in rhetoric, she has encouraged my interest in bringing folklore and rhetoric together. Her “outsider” perspective led to important, hard questions that were less obvious from within the field.

My committee chair, Amy Shuman, has been a constant source of support and intellectual engagement throughout, taking time for emails and phone calls as I completed this dissertation from afar. She read countless drafts, asked questions that led me in new and satisfying directions, and she continually reminded me that this project is important beyond the scope of the topic itself.

My ability to complete this project was made possible by the ongoing support of family and friends. All of my parents and my extended family have encouraged me throughout the process, and they have patiently believed that someday I will no longer be a graduate student.

My fieldwork was made possible by two of the most generous people on earth, Diana Taylor and Bob Gray, who provided me with not only a place to live

and work during my time in Kentucky, but with friendship during my off time. I am thankful to have such dear friends, and grateful that our friendship managed to be strengthened during my extended stays in their home.

Throughout this journey, I have been accompanied by my husband, best friend, and partner in folklore, Brent Björkman. Together in 2003, we sold our home, he left his job, and we picked up our lives in Frankfort, Kentucky, and moved to Columbus, Ohio, so that I could continue my graduate studies. Through my coursework, exams, fieldwork, and the writing process, he has remained both my greatest source of support and my biggest cheerleader. Thank you, Brent.

I wish to thank the following organizations and institutions for financial support that made my research and writing possible: the Kentucky Oral History Commission and Kentucky Historical Society (Project Grant, Transcription Grant), the OSU Center for Folklore Studies (Research Travel Grant), the OSU College of the Humanities (Graduate Research Small Grant), the OSU Department of English (Corbett Fellowship), and the American Association of University Women (American Dissertation Fellowship).

I am grateful for the resources of the Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives and the libraries of The Ohio State University and Middlebury College. The digital recordings of all interviews that I conducted over the course of my research are deposited in the archives of the Kentucky Oral History Commission, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky.

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- Book review. *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment Through Narrative* by Elaine J. Lawless, *Journal of American Folklore* vol. 166, no. 462 (2003).



“I am not handy, I had mine made”: Christmas Curb Lights as Expression of Individual and Community Aesthetics, *Tributaries: The Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association*, Issue no. 4, 2001.

#### Fields of Study

Major Field: English

Minor Field: Folklore

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INTRODUCTION: “Would you rather have present day or olden days?”:  
Tradition and Transition on Kentucky Burley Tobacco Farms

Frequently over the past decade, I have heard Kentucky natives comment with sadness on the changing landscape of their home state: the countryside of childhood will soon be gone. The links between landscape and culture, sense of place, history, and even identity have been widely acknowledged (cf. Hufford One Space, Many Places, Bogart and Schlereth). According to Lucy Lippard, “The intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology form the ground on which we stand—our land, our place, the local” (7). Gregory Clark argues, “*Land* becomes *landscape* when it is assigned the role of symbol, and as symbol it functions rhetorically” (9). The source of the sense of loss expressed by so many Kentuckians is not the expected—the loss of land to the proliferation of subdivisions and “big-box” retail stores, although certainly many bemoan such development. This sense of loss follows observations that the tobacco fields are disappearing.

It is difficult for many to understand the loss of *tobacco*—a crop that has come to symbolize addiction, disease, and a deceptive industry—as lamentable. My own relationships with tobacco reflect the complexities of the topic: I am a former smoker; as I write, one of my parents is suffering from multiple smoking-related illnesses; I lived in Kentucky for a number of years, where tobacco has meanings that are (seemingly) disconnected from tobacco products and the health effects of use. The loss of tobacco

has vast cultural and economic consequences, for farming communities as well as for the state as a whole, because tobacco has historically been Kentucky's largest cash crop, and it has been an important symbol of regional identity, along with bourbon, Bluegrass (the music and the forage), and thoroughbred horses. The changing landscape symbolizes a shift to a "Brave New World" (Bickers) in which King Burley no longer reigns and the future is uncertain—both economically and symbolically. I came to this project thinking that it would somehow be possible to conduct research with tobacco farmers disconnected from the consequences of tobacco use, and I found that not only is that not possible, but that attempts to keep the two disconnected—and the inevitable failure of such attempts—are central to the story. In this dissertation, I will provide a context for tobacco production in which the stories of tobacco farmers can be understood, not separate from, but within the context of, the changing symbolism of the crop.

### **Why Study Kentucky Tobacco?**

The perception of a lost traditional culture resulting in a changing landscape would seem to be enough to make Kentucky tobacco farming an ideal folklore dissertation topic. The current period of transition (a term with multiple meanings as I will discuss) is an obvious moment in need of both documentation and interpretation. Yet, there are other reasons, reaching far beyond Kentucky tobacco, that make this an important topic. As I will argue in this dissertation, this project provides an opportunity to examine a cultural practice that was formerly revered within the region, and was an iconic symbol of American history both inside and outside the region, but has become stigmatized at both local and larger than local levels. Stigma has repercussions that affect communities as

well as individuals, because tobacco traditions are so deeply tied to sense of place, sense of community, and sense of self. This case study provides an opportunity to look also at central folkloristic concepts—heritage, nostalgia, and tradition—within the context of stigma.

Another significant reason for studying Kentucky tobacco farming is only marginally addressed in this dissertation, and that is the growing sustainable agriculture movement. In recent years, even since I began this project, a popular movement to consume more foods grown and produced locally has exploded nationwide. Tobacco farming may seem unrelated to such a health- and environmentally-focused movement because the crop under production is good neither for the land nor for those who consume it, and because encouraging consumers to “smoke local” would not make for good public policy sound bites. However, tobacco farmers represent just one category of farmers that have depended on a particular crop for generations; a recognition of the economic and symbolic challenges faced by such farmers, when asked to “replace” their traditional crop with products for local consumption, is absent from public discourses which suggest that farmers should easily be able to move to crops that sustain both farms and local food needs. The voices of such farmers add a complexity to the “locavore” movement that is currently missing. Only when such voices are heard by both the public and public policy-makers, can agricultural policy be designed that truly takes their situations into consideration, benefiting farmers, consumers, and the environmental future.

## **Kentucky Burley Tobacco Production Today**

As I will describe in this dissertation, tobacco farming as cultural practice has been eulogized in the news and by Kentucky authors; it has been erased from the print and online publications of Kentucky governmental agencies; it has been removed from local festivals; and it has been put on exhibit as a part of the past. Informal conversations I have had since I began this research suggest that Kentuckians who are not involved in tobacco production believe that there are very few tobacco farmers left, and in fact my initial questions as I began my research reflected this assumption. I wrote in my prospectus that tobacco farmers are looking for alternatives, implying that they all are. I have found something different.

The vast majority of the tobacco farmers and agricultural professionals with whom I have conducted fieldwork express the conviction that tobacco continues to be a viable commodity for many farming families. Although tobacco can no longer support a farm, I am told, it can still generate a larger per-acre return than any other crop. In 2007, the average price farmers were paid per pound of burley tobacco was \$1.60, and the average per acre yield was 2000 pounds (USDA, Kentucky Agricultural Statistics and Annual Report 2007-2008 28); farmers therefore earned, on average, \$3200 per acre of burley (before in-put costs). That same year, based on average prices per bushel and yields per acre, the gross value of an acre of corn was \$528 and of soybeans was \$278 (USDA, Kentucky Agricultural Statistics and Annual Report 2007-2008 28).<sup>1</sup> Even

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that corn prices in 2007 were nearly double those of 2005, due to the boom in ethanol production. In 2005 the gross value of an acre of corn for Kentucky farmers was \$285 (USDA, Kentucky Agricultural Statistics and Annual Report 2005-2006 96-97). Attempts to increase corn production for the ethanol market have primarily taken place in the western region of the state, where the terrain is more suitable (less mountainous) and farms larger. Farmers have described the growing of corn

though tobacco costs more to produce—particularly in terms of labor—it is clear that replacing tobacco acreage with row crops such as corn or soybeans is no solution for Kentucky farmers, whose farms are historically small and hilly.

The number of tobacco farmers has decreased dramatically in recent decades; the number of tobacco farms of all types and in all regions of the United States fell from 512,000 in 1954 to 56,977 in 2002, with a 39% decline in the number of tobacco farms between 1997 and 2002 (Capehart “Trends” 3).<sup>2</sup> Between 2002 and 2007, the number of tobacco farms nationwide dropped further, from 56,977 to 16,234, although the number of pounds that were raised during the same period dropped only from about 873 million to 778 million (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture: United States 29). Although Kentucky tobacco production dropped over 30% in 2005, the year following the end of the federal tobacco program, the decline in Kentucky burley and dark-fired tobacco production was smaller than the decline in areas that specialize in flue-cured tobacco such as North and South Carolina and Virginia (Snell “Outlook”). Despite the record-low levels of tobacco production in Kentucky in 2005, Kentucky farmers continue to raise far more burley and dark tobaccos than any other state, and only North Carolina outranks Kentucky in total tobacco production (USDA, Kentucky Agricultural Statistics and Annual Report 2007-2008). A full 50% of U.S. tobacco farms are in Kentucky, and “the number of farms growing tobacco outnumber all other single ag enterprises in Kentucky with the exception of the number of cattle/hay farms” (Snell “Census”). The

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for the purpose of ethanol production as a disappointment because they have not reaped the promised rewards.

<sup>2</sup> The statistical decline in the number of tobacco farms is somewhat misleading, since “tobacco farm” is defined by the USDA as a farm with at least half of its receipts from the sale of tobacco. As allotments were cut tobacco income dipped and income from other sources rose, in terms of the percent of total farm income.

2007 Census of Agriculture revealed that there were 8114 tobacco farms in Kentucky that year (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture: Kentucky 27).

When the 2007 Census of Agriculture figures were released in February 2009, they came as somewhat of a surprise because there were a couple thousand more tobacco growers than the state's leading agriculture economist had estimated; even more surprising was the remaining number of small tobacco farms. I was told many times—by former and current tobacco farmers, extension agents, and others—that those who are continuing to grow tobacco are increasingly large; tobacco farms are becoming “industrial” farms, I was occasionally told by former tobacco farmers. Interestingly, however, according to the Census of Agriculture, in 2007 the largest group of Kentucky tobacco growers (33%) raised between 2 and 4.9 acres; only 10% raised 25 or more (Snell “Census”). A persistent thread throughout this dissertation is an attempt to understand the discrepancies between public perceptions of the numbers of tobacco farmers and the Census figures, and between public discourses about the current transition period and the discourses of tobacco farmers and others in tobacco communities.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation is the result of the collection of two kinds of data, broadly speaking. First, I rely on data that I gathered during my time in the field, in the dual sense of the word, primarily in the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky, the center of burley tobacco



production.<sup>3</sup> Research began on this project in 2005, with intensive fieldwork during the 2007 crop year (January 2007 through February 2008). During this period, I spent time on farms, observing and at times participating in tobacco production. I conducted one or more recorded interviews with over sixty farmers, warehousemen, and agricultural professionals, and I visited the farms of and had conversations with many others. In addition to my own interviews, with the support of a grant from the Kentucky Oral History Commission, I fully transcribed thirty-three recorded interviews conducted by interviewers John Klee and Lynne David between May 2000 and February 2002 with farmers, agriculture professionals, and policy-makers. I attended agricultural events such as trainings, meetings, and farm field days, and I visited public and private sites related to tobacco once it leaves the farm, such as one of the last remaining burley tobacco warehouses, tobacco receiving stations (where farmers now sell their crop), and a redrying facility (where tobacco is processed before it is shipped to manufacturing facilities). I also worked in the tobacco exhibit area of the Kentucky Folklife Festival in 2005 and 2007, “interpreting” tobacco traditions alongside farmers, interacting with and observing visitors to the tobacco tent, and conducting interviews both on and off stage.

Second, throughout the period of my research I have collected (both systematically and serendipitously) oral, print, and electronic sources of public discourses from a number of sites. I spent many days in the Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives, where I read and copied their collection of the newsletters of the Kentucky

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<sup>3</sup> My fieldwork included research in the following Kentucky counties: Anderson, Boyle, Bracken, Fayette, Fleming, Franklin, Garrard, Hardin, Hart, Henry, Jessamine, Lincoln, Mercer, Robertson, Scott, Shelby, Shelby, Upton, and Woodford. I conducted fieldwork exclusively with the farmers of one type of tobacco, burley. Chapter 1 includes a brief description of the development of the various types of tobacco and their uses.

Department of Agriculture. I have regularly visited and studied a number of websites, particularly those of state-sponsored agriculture agencies and farm organizations. I have collected published materials—books, pamphlets, brochures, booklets, fliers, posters, policy and statistical documents—about tobacco history and production from a range of sources, including tobacco industry lobbying and marketing organizations, tobacco companies, the state and federal government, research institutions, and farm organizations (many of these publications were given to me by participants in my fieldwork). During my time in the field, I read the major Kentucky newspapers on a daily basis, and I have utilized online databases to locate media coverage in past periods. I have also had (and overheard) many informal conversations about the past, present, and future of Kentucky tobacco production.

In the interconnected process of collecting and interpreting this data, I bring together my training as a folklorist with the theory and methods of the field of rhetoric, particularly the writings of Kenneth Burke. The connections between the fields of folklore and rhetoric are lengthy and well-established (for a recent explication on the connections, past and potential, see Gencarella), extending from our mutual claims to the influence of Gianbattista Vico (see Bendix 28 for folklore's connections to Vico), to the important connections between the work of Kenneth Burke and Dell Hymes, to current attempts to bring the fields together, such as this dissertation. Roger Abrahams has argued that the function of folklore is at its base rhetorical; folklore texts and performances are intended to persuade.<sup>4</sup> According to Abrahams, "Folklore, being

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<sup>4</sup> His argument is basically a functionalist one, in arguing that folklore's rhetorical purpose is to persuade toward the maintenance of the normative values of the culture. Folklore also, of course, may serve to challenge normative and hegemonic values, belief systems, and cultural practices.

traditional activity, argues traditionally; it uses argument and persuasive techniques developed in the past to cope with the recurrences of social problem situations” (“Introductory Remarks” 146).

In bringing the two together, I not only view the performance of traditional cultural practices as rhetorical and attempt to understand the rhetorical force of the usage of terms such as “tradition” and “heritage,” I also investigate the interactions between the performance of cultural practices and public discourses about such practices. “Public discourses” have been examined in a range of fields, often involving questions of what constitutes public and how various media produce, sustain, change, or limit understanding of an issue. In his rhetorical reading of American tourist landscapes, Gregory Clark defines “public discourse” as “the ongoing process of inquiry and exchange that is sustained by people who constitute...community” (9). Clark understands public discourses as not only “tak[ing] the form of print and speech” but also “experiences not immediately discursive at all” (9). My interest is in the emerging and evolving discourses surrounding tobacco farming in the context of other public discourses on tobacco—such as those related to smoking, health, and disease—as well as those related to farming, such as the “locavore” movement. This requires an understanding of the historical conditions in which these multiple discourses have emerged, and the ways in which they compete. It also requires an understanding of the discourses of tobacco farmers.

In a “caveat” meant to explain how his book, The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma, departs from “conventions of ‘traditional’ ethnographic documentation,” John Dorst describes such documentation as “an attempt to ‘get close

to,’ to understand and to describe the culture, values or world view of a certain set of people” (6). This was the task of my ethnographic fieldwork with tobacco farmers; I set out to understand not only tobacco farming practices but the meanings of these practices to farmers during this period of “transition.” I quickly understood that these “meanings” can only be understood within a context of the public discourses that surround these farmers and their ongoing processes of the generation of meaning(s); as they talked to me, they were also talking back to public discourses of tobacco as *heritage*, to those that argue that tobacco is being replaced by *diversified* farming, and of course to those that argue that the crop that they depend upon is *lethal*. These and other discourses surrounding *tobacco* serve as screens through which tobacco is differently understood.

Kenneth Burke writes:

When I speak of “terministic screens,” I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were *different* photographs of the *same* objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so “factual” as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending on which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded. (“Terministic Screens” 45 *emphases in original*)

Tobacco farming (and more importantly, tobacco *farmers*) takes on differing, often competing, textures and symbolic meanings dependent on the discursive screen through which it is considered. My folklore training helps me to understand how people communicate (with each other, with me) on the ground; rhetoric helps me to understand the persuasive work of discourses (both on the ground and seemingly all around, in more public discourses), and what is included and what left out in order for persuasion to take place. Together, they help me to understand interactions between multiple domains—

rather than attempting to separate public from private, cultural practices from how they are represented in multiple sites.

I would be remiss if I did not also note that my attempt to understand tobacco farmers within the context of such public discourses and the changing symbolism of the crop is just that: *my* attempt. James Clifford and George E. Marcus' 1986 publication of Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography was part of an important turning point for not only the doing of but the writing of ethnography. Writing Culture, as its name implies, is an attempt to understand ethnographic texts as created by the ethnographer-as-rhetor. In the introduction to this volume, James Clifford states that the essays contained within “focus on text making and rhetoric serv[ing] to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts. It undermines overly transparent modes of authority, and it draws attention to the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of culture” (2).

Since this publication, folklorists have experimented in important ways with “reflexive,” “reciprocal,” and “collaborative” ethnographic projects (see Lawless “‘Reciprocal’ Ethnography” and Holy Women, Wholly Women; Mullen “The Dilemma of Representation”). Elaine Lawless defines “reciprocal ethnography” as a relationship in which “no voice is privileged over another” (“‘Reciprocal’ Ethnography” 199). Even in her model (Holy Women, Wholly Women), however, it is the ethnographer’s voice that is ultimately privileged; most simply, it is her book. These experiments have been important learning experiences for the field—generating crucial dialogues and demanding some level of reflexivity in all our work—but have not solved the problems identified by Clifford, Marcus, Mullen, Lawless, and many others. I do not attempt to

solve this problem here, but I do take full responsibility for the interpretations I offer as I try to understand tobacco culture through the many screens of my own, both scholarly and personal. I came to my fieldwork as an outsider and I write as an outsider; this both limits my ability to understand tobacco culture from an insider perspective and provides me with the opportunity to offer an interpretation from the outside looking in.

Because I came to this work as not only an outsider, but also as a woman attempting to understand a cultural practice that is largely gendered male, a brief discussion of the gendered implications of my fieldwork and writing experiences is warranted. As Debora Kodish wrote in her well-known critique of folklorists' "discovery" narratives, "explicit mention of gender has seldom been made, but gender relations are constantly present as subtexts, as powerful and present themes within the stories that folklorists tell themselves" (572). Writing about her work as a woman documenting vernacular architecture, an enterprise long treated as male terrain, Michael Ann Williams asks, "How does our own gender and the gender of those we study expand or restrict our access to certain types of information?" ("Come on Inside" 47). Women fieldworkers have often, to varying degrees, been able to conduct fieldwork in male spaces while also gaining access to female spaces that male fieldworkers are barred from, particularly in cases of Western women doing fieldwork in non-Western contexts because cultural difference provides varying degrees of ambiguity regarding gendered performances and roles (cf. Nader, Fischer, and Mead in Golde, ed.). Although I conducted fieldwork in an American community in a state in which I once lived, I was and I remain an outsider to tobacco culture as a non-farmer, non-Kentuckian, academic,

feminist woman. I came to see my gender and my outsider status as both restricting and beneficial.

Not only am I a woman, but my status as a student served to reinforce my status as *young*, and therefore I may have appeared both less threatening and more in need of teaching. I realized early on that assumptions were being made about my age (as a young student with no children) that were at least ten years off (see also Friedl on appearing younger than she actually was). Pat Mullen suggested to me early on that being a young woman might be an advantage, particularly with older men who might take a fatherly interest in teaching me; this turned out to be the case, as such men most often took on the role of teacher and treated me as an eager student in ways that they might not have had I been male. As Jean Briggs has written, female status often leads to classification as a child in relation to informants (40); like Michael Ann Williams, I was often treated as a “nice young girl” (47). When I met or interviewed men for the first time, they almost always assumed I knew nothing about tobacco production, and they therefore started their tutoring at the most basic level. At the beginning, I really *did* know nothing, and this helped me immeasurably; as my research progressed, and my knowledge increased, this approach continued to be useful because not only did I continue to learn the details of tobacco production, but I was also being offered rich comparative data. Although I will never know, I suspect that were I a man, male farmers would have expected me to have more fundamental agricultural knowledge, and therefore their lessons would have been less basic; a male fieldworker might have been tested on his prior knowledge in ways that I was not.

My awareness of my gender was not limited to my fieldwork encounters, but continues into the writing process. As a woman writing about men, I risk “recentering the very male authority [I] seek to challenge and revise” (Newton and Stacey 297). Yet, as Ruth Behar has written, “Feminist revision is always about a new way of looking at all categories, not just at ‘woman’” (6). Judith Newton and Judith Stacey ask “whether a postmodern feminism can afford, any more than modernist feminism, to be a project for women only” (289). I wish to argue that part of the project must be to re-center men in order to examine male cultures—rather than generalize about them—from a feminist perspective *while also, always* keeping women at the center. The argument that one cannot simultaneously understand the (false) binary of men’s and women’s cultures only serves to reinforce the (false) binary which currently frames the dominant view of gender. What does it mean to “center” men or women, and can we instead bring gender to the center rather than choose one gender to center and therefore one to marginalize? This is part of what I try to accomplish in this dissertation—understanding the gendered implications of the transition of a tradition most overtly gendered male, while also focusing on women’s roles and perspectives in this transition. My participant-observation work was almost exclusively with men because tobacco work is done almost exclusively by men now, and I attempted to balance this by actively seeking the perspectives of women in conversations and recorded interviews.

### **A Narrative of Change**

I am indebted to the first tobacco farmer I interviewed as I began this project in 2005, the late Mr. Robert Taylor of Bracken County, in part because he provided me with the



knowledge I needed in order to ask my future interviewees much more informed questions than those that I asked him. But, he also asked *me* an important question. Following a driving tour of the Taylor farm that included his cattle and pastures, his tobacco barns, his garden, and of course his tobacco crop, we sat down in the living room for an interview, and began with this exchange:

Ann: ...And one of the things that, that you talked about [during our farm tour] is the different parts of the process? Um, and I wondered if you could walk me through like the whole year, you know what the different...

Robert Taylor: Uh, okay, I'll do my best uh. Would you rather have, present day or olden days? There's a whole lot of difference.<sup>5</sup>

I replied that I wanted him to tell it in the way that he thought it should be told, and perhaps he might tell me about both. In this first interview, I learned that the narrative of tobacco farming revolves around change, and I continued my fieldwork with an initially unacknowledged assumption that this equaled nostalgia for "the olden days." Despite a critical understanding of the need to avoid approaching tradition and change as a dichotomy, that is exactly what I was looking for: adherence to tradition and resistance to change. And this seemed at first to be what I was finding.

In the same interview, I asked Bob Taylor why he was raising tobacco that year, the first year after the end of the federal tobacco program, when many had quit; he told me, with a laugh, "I don't know, tradition." A 2007 interview with Franklin County

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I provide excerpted quotations transcribed from recorded interviews that I conducted over the course of my research. I follow standard transcription conventions, which means that I have not edited for grammatical correctness or deleted repeated words or false starts, and I have included utterances such as "uh" and "um." Punctuation is used within transcribed passages not to reflect conventions of written English, but to suggest the flow of speech. For instance, commas represent brief pauses, periods represent longer pauses, and dashes are used to denote a rapid change from one thought to the next.

tobacco farmer Martin Henson seemed to only confirm this narrative. At one point he told me, “I get asked every now and then ‘why you raising, still raising tobacco?’ ‘Tradition’s what I tell ‘em.’”

“Tradition” is of course a central concept for folklorists, but a complex concept that we and other scholars have increasingly thought, as Dan Ben-Amos put it, not just *with* but *about* (“Seven Strands”). Despite our efforts to rethink our use of this term, “tradition” continues to be employed in both scholarly and everyday usage as what Kenneth Burke calls a polar term, a term with implied opposites such as change, creativity, innovation, dynamism, and modernity.<sup>6</sup> Even scholars trying to undo this binary tend to fall back into it. For example, Barre Toelken defines variation as the “most reliable key to tradition” and states that variation is never random; instead: “Balancing the dynamism of traditional change is the conservative force of tradition itself” (96). Here, Toelken refers to change as “traditional,” and then he immediately states that tradition itself is the unchanging or “conservative” force with which change must grapple. In his now classic examination of tradition, sociologist Edward Shils argued that although tradition can be understood as process (and traditions as always undergoing change), there are in fact “essential elements” that remain recognizable (14). As recently as 2005, James Bau Graves described tradition as the “synergetic opposite” of innovation and “the rock for innovation to push against” (43).

Binary approaches to tradition and change reinforce the very paradigm folklorists have worked in recent years to eradicate from our discipline: an oppositional

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<sup>6</sup> For “polar terms” see Burke “Definition of Man” 11.

understanding of tradition and modernity.<sup>7</sup> Despite our attempts to reframe disciplinary objectives, tradition continues to be associated with the past, opposed to modernity; all too often tradition continues to be framed as dying, and in some cases as something that needs to be saved from certain death.<sup>8</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, “The discipline of folklore has long assumed—even required—the imminent disappearance of what it sets out to study, namely ways of life threatened by industrialization and mass media...” (“From the Paperwork Empire” 69). Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, concerned with the construction of “modernity” through discourse, discuss tradition as it relates to—as it was created by—language ideologies. According to Bauman and Briggs, “When used in the service of articulating a purified, modern conception of language...that is when it is used to differentiate the past from the present, tradition becomes a mode of discourse that is diagnostic of the past” (11). Rhetorics of tradition as dying and in need of being saved still pervade our work, whether in academia or in public sectors.

Importantly, Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin argued in 1984 against the assumption, in both scholarly (particularly Edward Shils’ work) and “commonsense” definitions of tradition, that tradition has a natural and unchanging core; instead, they argue, “tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present” (276). They define tradition as “symbolic process” with “assigned meaning” (286); tradition has relationships with the past but can be either

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the construction of a dichotomy of tradition and modernity see Shuman and Briggs and Bauman and Briggs.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has referred to the desire to “save” folklore just before it disappears as “eleventh-hour ethnography” (as quoted in Abrahams “Phantoms” 11). Dan Ben-Amos points out that our use of the phrase “living traditions”—used as early as the late nineteenth century—makes sense only within the context of tradition as “on the verge of total demise” (Seven Strands 104).

continuous or discontinuous—but at the same time, “continuity is constructed” (287).

The danger in conceptualizing tradition naturalistically, according to Handler and Linnekin, is that we then,

...treat culture and its constituents as entities having an essence apart from our interpretation of them; we attempt to specify, for example, which trait is old, which new, and to show how traits fit together in the larger entities that we call ‘a culture’ and ‘a tradition.’ The task of the naturalistic science of tradition is to identify and describe the essential attributes of cultural traits, rather than to understand our own and our subjects’ interpretive models. (273-4)

Following Handler and Linnekin, a challenge that I set for myself was to understand how members of tobacco communities—including farmers young and old, male and female, with operations large and small—understand tradition and change.

The study of a “traditional” occupation such as tobacco farming would once perhaps have focused on the documentation of the many elements of tobacco farming that have remained unchanged over the years, and the ways in which growers are dependent on knowledge that has been passed down through multiple generations. My task, in part, might have been to weed out the “traditional” practices from the “new” or in the words of Handler and Linnekin, “to specify...which trait is old, which new” (273). My interviews with Taylor and Henson seemed to present me with such a project—the very approach critiqued by Handler and Linnekin, and that I had set out to avoid. Following a dichotomous model of tradition and change, such a study might have both resulted from and reinforced romanticized stereotypes about rural people, and farmers in particular, and their resistance to change. At one point, Martin Henson seemed to paint this very picture

of himself, when he told me in 2007, “I’m old-fashioned. My wife says uh ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’ she says ‘he does not like change’ and I don’t, I don’t.”

As I will describe in Chapter 7, when I transcribed my interview with Martin I came to realize that I was approaching this project with expectations of collecting nostalgic lamentations about how things used to be done a certain way, but times have changed and as a result tobacco quality has suffered. And I have heard such lamentations. Again, an early interview was important in generating my expectations. In 2005, a man who has worked in tobacco part time all of his life (while working fulltime in manufacturing), but who does not raise his own crop, described the new larger tobacco growers to me in these disparaging terms, “They treat it like ... balin’ hay or somethin’” (Long). This comment speaks volumes about the reverence with which the crop has historically been treated within tobacco communities; tobacco is a crop that is often understood as a *craft* because of the unique functional and aesthetic skills necessary at every stage of production. I assumed this comment was representative of what I would continue to hear as I interviewed more and more growers—that farmers were moving away from traditional and “right” ways of doing things and no longer treated the crop with the respect it deserved, with pride.

Although I have heard additional, similar lamentations, it is of course much more complex. As I will describe, there were times when it was clear from my questions that I was forgetting that it is not only “a way of life,” as it is often described in public and private discourses, but it is also an occupation. For instance, the following exchange took place in my first interview with the current president of the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association in January of 2008:

Ann: But did it- was it important to you to continue growing some amount of tobacco, despite other opportunities that you had or?

Roger Quarles: Well, uh... You gotta understand I never did particularly *love* growing tobacco, I did it because it was a business opportunity.

Clearly, I wanted to be told about an emotional attachment to the crop, not *just* an economic one. While many other farmers, including Martin Henson, told me that they *do* enjoy raising tobacco for a number of reasons, I was told many times that no matter how much anybody might enjoy it, no one enjoyed it enough (or was *stupid* enough) to keep doing it if it didn't pay. Farmers taught me over and over that they continue this "tradition" because it provides an income.

It became clear that I needed to understand *why* farmers consistently emphasized the economic importance of tobacco. Most obviously, perhaps, they suspected that I didn't fully appreciate that the crop was their livelihood. But, as I describe in later chapters, I began to look closely at the public discourses surrounding tobacco farming, and I began to see that the economic role of tobacco was important in the face of the stigma that has increasingly become attached to tobacco. I began to see that a rhetorical move had been made in which tobacco farming was labeled as heritage, and with this move the present-day economic importance of tobacco to families, communities, and the Commonwealth of Kentucky has been erased. Representations in multiple rhetorical sites present tobacco farmers through a screen of heritage, resulting in beliefs that tobacco farmers are holding onto a crop that is no longer profitable because they are bound by tradition—too stubborn or too stupid to let go of the crop. As farmers and I discussed the importance of documenting this tradition for the historical record through

oral history interviews, they wanted me to know that tobacco continues to be of economic importance in the present.<sup>9</sup>

This brings me back to why farmers *can't* view changes within the tradition of tobacco farming as in opposition to tradition: those changes that help them continue to make a profit—to raise the crop more efficiently—are necessary to their very survival. As I will discuss, however, obtaining the knowledge and equipment needed to move to new crops would constitute a different kind of change, involving economic and symbolic risks that many are not willing to take (and that some have taken only to be faced with failure).

However, by asserting that tobacco is of great economic importance I do not argue that tobacco is not also of great symbolic importance. Much of what follows is, in fact, my attempt to understand the relationship between the two. There is nostalgia around tobacco production, of course, but it does not necessarily follow the single path that I initially encountered. Nostalgia takes multiple forms depending on the position of the person expressing it, and, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, farmer nostalgia can be understood as gendered, with expressions by men often centering on a comparison between the way things are done today and the practices of fathers and grandfathers.

While Martin Henson described his father “turning over” in his grave at the idea of baled

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<sup>9</sup> I often stressed to farmers that their interviews were not only important to me, but that they will be archived in the Kentucky Historical Society (in the collections of Kentucky Oral History Commission) so that future generations can also learn from them. I am aware that this was an attempt on my part to express my strong belief in the historical importance of their individual voices and their place in the historical record, as well as to build my own ethos as not only a student from an out of state university interested in their story, but a researcher with ties to a respected state institution. I wanted them each to know that their story is important, to me and to others. Debora Kodish has described (and challenged) the narrative formula of “discovery” that folklorists have often relied upon in describing first encounters with (perhaps only seemingly) reluctant tradition bearers “awakened to the new worth of their heritage, transformed by the folklorist’s visit” (574). Such assurances on my part may have also served as reproductions of the very public discourses of tobacco as heritage and history that I critique here, resulting in an effort on the part of some of my interviewees to let me know that tobacco is not just history.

tobacco (rather than tobacco proudly tied in *hands* as it once was), Clarence Gallagher, a generation younger than Martin, described with awe the neatness of his own father's bales. Clarence described a particularly messy load of tobacco that he had seen and I asked him what his father would have said about it. He responded,

Oh my goodness. Dad's- uh, I wished I'd uh- I had took some pictures of of tobacco that he had, he had fooled with. [AF: yeah] And just actually showed you what older people did. I mean his, his bale just looked like [...] you know you could just shoot a rifle right down the side end of 'em you know what I mean just never- you know he's just, everything was just- just neat.

Mr. Taylor's question stayed with me, but it was a while before I realized that what he had given me was the narrative structure of the story of tobacco in the early twenty-first century: a narrative of change and transition. Although "transition"—in its multiple uses—most often refers explicitly to the aftermath of the end of the federal tobacco program in 2004 (as described in Chapter 1), tobacco production can more generally be understood as tradition in process, ever-changing, continually transitioning. Rather than merely mourning the loss of "the olden days," farmers understand change and transition as a process of gains and losses, of trade-offs; they recognize what is lost through change (often in the realm of the symbolic) at the same time that they point out what is gained (often economic; yet, as Clarence's description of his father's bales suggests, the "changed" "tradition" takes on symbolic meanings as well).

This narrative structure was to become central to the structure of my interviews over the next three years. Listening back to those interviews, it is clear that at times I have helped to structure them in this way through the types of questions I have asked—most obviously, I have often asked, "What changes have you seen over the years...?"—



and yet, often that structure has come from my interviewees. For instance, in describing the many steps involved in raising a crop of tobacco, the changes over the years are consistently central to each narrative. Most didn't ask me if I wanted to hear about "present day or olden days" as Bob Taylor did, they simply offered me a comparative narrative that included how things are done today and how they were done at some other point in time (often undefined and often actually including multiple time periods as changes were listed). It is for this reason that I have written Chapter 2, in which I describe the 2007 crop year, in much this way.

### **Dissertation Structure**

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I provide a meta-history of Kentucky tobacco production, in order to contextualize the topic and to understand the ways in which the historical narrative has, in Hayden White's terms, been emplotted. I begin with a brief overview of the development of the tobacco industry in Kentucky and describe the major events and circumstances as they have been described by various tobacco historians. As I reach more recent "history"—particularly the dismantling of the federal tobacco program and the resulting transition period for farmers—I emplot my own narrative based on my fieldwork and on media accounts.

The purpose of Chapter 2 is two-fold. I provide a description of the details of tobacco production from the planting of seeds in the spring through the sale of the crop, demonstrating the complexity of the production of this "13-month crop." My means of description leads to the second purpose of the chapter, which is to provide a feel for the tone of my fieldwork and to introduce many of the individuals who will appear

throughout the dissertation. Martin Henson, my primary guide through the 2007 crop year, is at the center of the chapter; I provide examples and quotations from Martin and other farmers as I describe cultural practices, tools and equipment, technological innovations, marketing changes, and so on.

One result of the many changes that have taken place in tobacco production and marketing, is that there is no longer a *typical* burley tobacco farmer. At one time, although there were certainly differences based on economic class and farm/land ownership, farmers largely faced the same issues, and their practices varied only marginally from farm to farm or county to county. Crop sizes certainly varied, but not widely as compared with today's variations. The current period of "transition" has brought with it enormous variability. I worked with the full spectrum of growers, from small growers who depend very little on hired labor, to growers of hundreds of acres who, as one farmer described it, "never touch a stalk of tobacco." The changes that have taken place have resulted in changing relationships with the crop, which, as I will discuss later in this dissertation, is less tangible but more powerful than any single change in farm practice. In the second chapter, I attempt to demonstrate this lack of typicality through my examples.

In the third chapter, I step back from my fieldwork (although I am certainly informed by it) as I examine one particular rhetorical site and the narrative found there about the changing symbolism of tobacco. The newsletter of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture provides a particular "official" perspective on tobacco and its symbolic and economic meanings in Kentucky. As the newsletter began in 1944, I will argue, tobacco was presented as a symbolically self-evident but economically self-conscious part of the

Kentucky economy and agricultural landscape. The newsletter provides not only “news” reports of the events and circumstances that took place over the following decades, but I will argue, through my analysis of the rhetorical strategies of the Department of Agriculture, that the newsletter provides a picture of the growing stigma around tobacco and multiple failed attempts to recover tobacco from the stigma. I argue that by 2008, where I end my analysis, what is *not* said about tobacco is as important as what once was.

In Chapter 4, I apply the stigma theory of Erving Goffman—both his original work and the updated theory of Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan—to the newly stigmatized category of *tobacco farmer*. I examine expressions related to the movement of tobacco farmers from a category of respect, to one of stigma, and the ways in which they both *manage* (in Goffman’s terms) and *resist* stigma. This chapter is meant to be brief, to establish the existence of stigma, in order to lay the ground for the following chapters, in which I deal with the growing stigma attached to the category, its consequences, and farmers’ responses to it.

Heritage scholars have increasingly focused on the “production” of heritage as a means of attempting to resuscitate dying economies. In Chapter 5, I will use the work of such scholars as a lens through which to examine “tobacco heritage,” arguing that not all tobacco heritage fits neatly into current heritage theory. James F. Abrams has called for an examination of “vernacular” as well as “institutional” expressions of heritage, and this chapter is one response to Abrams’ call. However, while Abrams is interested in locating “struggle[s] for collective memory” (25) through the study of institutional and vernacular heritages, in the case of tobacco, the struggle is not about the past, but about the present and future. I will argue that institutional heritage ushered tobacco into the past and

contributed to the spread of the stigma from the industry to farmers, while expressions of vernacular heritage resist these results and argue “we’re still here.”

In Chapter 6, I examine the gendered implications of the production of tobacco, past and present. Even though women and children have always had important roles to play in the production of tobacco as a family farm commodity, the crop and the cultural practices surrounding it have traditionally resided in male control. One exception to the increasing lack of typicality among farmers that I mention above is gender.<sup>10</sup> Men have had the primary multi-generational relationship with tobacco as a crop, a craft, and a source of occupational identity, and it is men who are most involved in continuing the tradition today, while women are currently leading the way in successful efforts to move to alternative crops. There are of course exceptions, a handful of women who are heavily involved in the tobacco production taking place on their farms. In this chapter, I will describe the traditional division of labor and the many ways that tobacco production forms the basis of a traditionalized performance of masculinity for “tobacco men.” Tobacco nostalgia is gendered, and I will also examine expressions of a golden age of masculinity, as the traditionalized performance of “tobacco man” is understood to be a thing of the past.

Public discourses focus on the changing face of Kentucky agriculture, asking what crops will replace the dying tobacco tradition; some attempt to create new associations, suggesting that Kentucky agricultural is now based on vegetable production, vineyards, value-added products, and other types of alternative agriculture. Writing

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<sup>10</sup> The other exception is race. African American tobacco farmers seem to be disproportionately getting out of burley tobacco. Of the handful of black farmers that I interviewed or spent time with during my fieldwork, only one continues to raise tobacco.

about “narratives of progress and preservation” in Appalachia, Mary Hufford notes that “coal camps in their postindustrial incarnation don’t fit into the state’s grand narrative” (“Reclaiming the Commons” 112). Similarly, tobacco—as a stigmatized tradition—has lost its place in the narrative that the state puts forward about Kentucky agriculture, even as its production continues. “Diversification,” as I will discuss in Chapter 7, is a concept with rhetorical force, multiple meanings, and often gendered implications. In this chapter, I will examine the divergent meanings of “diversification” and “transition” in dominant and alternate discourses about Kentucky agriculture. I will examine the polar concept of “tradition” in this context, both in terms of the valuing of innovation over tradition in public discourses and the complex meanings of tradition for tobacco farmers.

The following exchange took place toward the end of my fieldwork, during an interview with Jonathon Shell and his grandfather, with whom I visited many times over the previous year:

Ann: I was asking your granddad what he thought about me coming down and learning from ya’ll, for really almost a year-

Jonathon: Well I like it. I hope you romanticize tobacco in your dissertation and you get published that way people will start loving it

Ann: So you think I should romanticize it uh?

Jonathon: Yeah

Ann: And what does that mean?

Jonathon: Just make it intimate. To where that they can see that you know, there’s hands that touch this stuff, and that there’s lives that are dependent on it.

While my task has not been to romanticize tobacco farming in this dissertation, I do hope that I have succeeded in demonstrating that “there’s hands that touch this stuff, and that there’s lives that are dependent on it.”

## CHAPTER 1: Kentucky Tobacco Production: A Metahistory

Tobacco has been a favorite subject of writers over the five centuries since Europeans were introduced to it. In addition to countless volumes about tobacco use and about the tobacco industry, a number of histories have been written about tobacco production over the course of the twentieth century. These histories can be easily categorized into three types: 1) those that focus on the agricultural history of tobacco as a crop with a distinct culture (e.g. Axton, Daniel, Morgan, Sullivan, Tatham, van Willigen and Eastwood); 2) those that are primarily interested in tobacco use and the tobacco industry, but also include some discussion of tobacco farming (e.g. American Tobacco Company, Gately, Heimann, Robert, Wagner); and 3) histories written by those inside tobacco farming communities with a focus on a particular experience or perspective. This last category includes individuals (e.g. Steed, Bailey, Berry, Hall and Berry) as well as organizations and institutions (e.g. Burley Auction Warehouse Association [Greene], Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association, the Council for Burley Tobacco, and the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture Co-operative Extension [Snell, Duncan, others]). The purpose of this chapter is to present a metahistory of the tobacco historical narrative as it has been written in order to provide a relevant context for the chapters that follow. It

is important to understand not only the “facts” of tobacco history but how the story of tobacco production has been structured.<sup>11</sup>

Hayden White has famously argued that the historian “emplots” a particular story of history by pulling from a “chronicle of events” in the historical record. According to White, “When a given set of events has been motifically encoded, the reader has been provided with a story” (6). Although an analysis based on White’s method of getting to the “historical style” of a particular writer would surely result in distinct and important differences among the volumes of tobacco history I have mentioned, I am more interested here in their similarities. When read together, the ways in which these tobacco histories are similarly emplotted becomes clear—they hinge on the same historical events and analogous descriptive passages, and end up telling similar ideologically-based stories about the role of the crop, those who grow it, and those who manufacture products with it.

In terms of the more recent works, the influence of W.F. Axton’s 1975 publication, Tobacco and Kentucky, is important to note. In his Preface, this descendant of a Louisville-based tobacco company family (Axton-Fischer, purchased by Philip

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, another way tobacco history has been approached is through explicate critique and analysis of the industry and the impact of tobacco, economically and culturally, worldwide. For instance, throughout his well-known historical analysis of sugar production and consumption, Sweetness and Power, Sidney Mintz makes comparisons between the spread of the consumption of sugar and of tobacco (as well as other “drug foods,” including rum and tea). Mintz argues, for instance, that the “provision of low-cost food substitutes, such as tobacco, tea, and sugar, for the metropolitan laboring classes” served as a means of increasing labor output and therefore “such substitutes figured importantly in balancing the accounts of capitalism” (148). Further, Mintz argues that “Tobacco, sugar, and tea were the first objects within capitalism that conveyed with their use the complex idea that one could *become* different by *consuming* differently” (185).

Here I am interested specifically in those histories that purport to present a narrative of tobacco in order to inform rather than critique. It is my hope that through my use of Hayden White’s view of “history” as emplotted narrative, however, I make it clear that I am not arguing that these authors are not also interpreting. On the contrary, through their emplotment, the “histories” that I have chosen to include here either implicitly or explicitly argue that tobacco was a positive force in the development of the nation (and Kentucky).



Morris) referred to his work as “the first full-length history of Kentucky’s tobacco” (ix). Tobacco and Kentucky has since become the default source for subsequent histories, so in one sense it was Axton that defined how the story of Kentucky tobacco would be told. However, although Axton was correct that there had been no volume that focused exclusively on telling the historical story of Kentucky tobacco until he took on the task, there were multiple volumes about the history of tobacco in America more broadly; Axton told much the same story as his predecessors, only he moved Kentucky to the center and of course updated the story.

The first book-length historical account of tobacco production and commerce was written by William Tatham in 1800, as colonists were moving west to Kentucky and beginning to plant tobacco there. The early European fascination with the crop demonstrated by Tatham’s lengthy treatment of the details of tobacco farming and commerce is in itself interesting, but Tatham’s work is also of great interest here because, despite a span of two hundred years (and therefore the addition of two hundred years of “history”), Tatham’s story is recognizable in the story told by Axton and other writers. Beginning with Tatham (in fact, with earlier writers that Tatham cites), the story of tobacco production is a story about farmers with specialized knowledge about this labor-intensive crop who must fight to eke out a living by growing a commodity that has generated tremendous wealth for manufacturers and governments. It is a story of conflict between those that raise tobacco and those that purchase it and manufacture goods with it; balancing supply and demand is at the core of the story of conflict.

Tobacco’s economic importance has been central to the story of the crop. Its iconic status in American (and later Kentucky) history and culture has, since European

contact with it, been inseparable from its economic importance. As early as the late eighteenth century, tobacco's role in shaping the nation was central to the story. Tatham wrote:

We learn from these laws [regulating tobacco commerce] how much the subject of this staple was interwoven in the spirit of the times; and how nearly the history of the tobacco plant is allied to the chronology of an extensive and flourishing country, whole measures contribute greatly, even at this day, to give a tone to the affairs of the American union. (184)

According to later versions of the story, the crop was responsible for the settling of colonial America as well as the Western frontier. It is only in the late twentieth century, as I will discuss in later chapters, that attempts have been made to rhetorically separate the symbol from the economy.

There are particular events and details that writers have used to demonstrate the symbolic importance of tobacco in the establishment of the American colonies, and I will begin this chapter by listing them. I will then turn to a more detailed narrative structured upon the development of tobacco as a cash crop and its rise to the center of the Kentucky economy, early twentieth century conflicts and the creation of the federal tobacco program, the intensification of the stigma that had surrounded its use since Europeans were first introduced to it, and the demise of the federal tobacco program. As I arrive at more recent "history" and move beyond written historical accounts, I emplot a story of my own about the lead up to the present situation for Kentucky tobacco. In order to do so, I pull from primary source materials such as periodicals and interviews, and so my emplotment is informed by the events and circumstances as narrated in public discourses and by members of the tobacco community; ultimately of course, the choices are mine.

## **Tobacco: A Historical Icon<sup>12</sup>**

Tobacco has long held an iconic place in the history and culture of both the United States and Kentucky. It has been called “America’s oldest industry” because of its economic importance in America since (and even before) the European discovery of the plant upon first contact with Native Americans, at which time it had long been a major item of trade between Native American peoples (Wagner 8). As early as 3000 B.C.E., Native Americans “were smoking tobacco for a variety of ritual, social, and diplomatic purposes as well as for personal pleasure” (Axton 3) and were also using the plant for a number of medicinal purposes throughout the Americas (Axton 8). Christopher Columbus first mentioned the “dry leaves” that appeared to be of great importance to the Indians in a diary entry written in 1492 (Wagner 7), although the first gift of tobacco he received was said to have been thrown overboard as, presumably, he and his crew did not know what it was (Gately 23).

Over the course of the sixteenth century, tobacco spread across Europe, Asia, and Africa “largely through the agency of traders and sailors who carried the weed and the habit of using it in various ways throughout the world,” and by 1607 the Spanish had a “virtual monopoly” on the crop (Axton 24, see also Gately). By this time, the English had developed a “ravenous appetite” for tobacco, despite the admonitions of King James I, making the cultivation of tobacco under English control particularly desirable in order to avoid importation costs (Axton 24-25). The survival of Jamestown, after two failed

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<sup>12</sup> As I will describe in a later chapter, the performance by those within tobacco communities of recounting some of the details listed here—expressing the importance of tobacco heritage—is one form of several different rhetorics of defense of tobacco production that I have identified.

attempts, is attributed to John Rolfe's successful development of the crop (Wagner 14, Axton 25), opening the way for further "settlement" of the continent. Rolfe made his first attempt to grow a crop of tobacco in 1612, and by 1618 Virginians raised twenty-thousand pounds in that year (Gately 72).

Tobacco warehouses were "one of the first businesses to be regulated" in colonial North America, with "nearly ten major acts about inspecting or warehousing leaf tobacco" passed between 1619 and 1732 (Greene 14). Tobacco financed one third of all seventeenth century English immigrants (van Willigen and Eastwood 10), and by 1664, twenty-four million pounds of tobacco were being exported from the colonies to England (Axton 25). Tobacco taxes directly financed the establishment of William and Mary College in 1693 (Robert 15). Not only did tobacco help to fund the American Revolution, but some "argue that the unfavorable terms of trade and heavy debt burden that colonial tobacco planters had with English merchants and tobacco consignees were important factors in establishing colonial rebelliousness toward Britain" (van Willigen and Eastwood 10). George Washington raised tobacco (Wagner 25), and in 1791, during his first presidential term, tobacco exports totaled \$4,359,567 "making it the nation's principal export crop" (Axton 44). "The tobacco leaf was woven so deeply into the fabric of American life that it was used as a motif in the decoration of columns in the Capitol" (Wagner 121).<sup>13</sup>

In the earliest days of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, receipts serving as proof of stored tobacco "could serve as currency in payment of fees, fines, forfeitures, and

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<sup>13</sup> Tobacco adorns the columns in the Small Senate Rotunda, reconstructed in 1816 after the 1814 fire, as well as the twenty-eight columns lining the Hall of Columns, constructed in the mid-nineteenth century. Other agricultural representations include corn cob capitals elsewhere in the Capitol. ("Architectural Features")

debts both public and private” (Axton 44). According to van Willigen and Eastwood, “Tobacco is American. Some farmers see it as a link they have with Native Americans. In some regions of America, tobacco is a historic icon. The seal of the city of Lexington, Kentucky, has a tobacco leaf on it...” (3) as does the seal of the city of Owensboro in western Kentucky (and most likely others).

### **The Growth of Kentucky’s Number One Cash Crop**

The basic method of raising a crop of tobacco, described in Chapter 2, were learned by Europeans from Native Americans, “including the details of proper spacing in the field, topping and suckering the plants, and the distinctive drying processes now known as air-curing, sun-curing, and fire-curing” (Wagner 14). Detailed descriptions of the practices involved in raising a crop of tobacco have, since the eighteenth century, been central to the story of tobacco. In 1784, British traveler John Ferdinand Smyth published a two-volume account of his adventures in America, describing “population, agriculture, commerce, customs, and manners of inhabitants” as well as “a description of the Indian Nations” and the geography of the continent (title page). Volume two includes a lengthy description of the process of raising a tobacco crop in Virginia because, as he points out, the production of this crop is little known in his country and yet “has become a commodity so beneficial to commerce” (127). This description is in many ways consistent with methods of tobacco production either as they exist today or at least as they existed within living memory of many tobacco farmers with whom I conducted fieldwork, and includes language that remains in use today such as preparing *plant beds*, *topping* and *suckering*, the use of *tobacco sticks* in the *curing* of tobacco, *tying* cured

tobacco into *hands*, and storing it in *bulks*. Curing practices vary much more widely from then to now, as multiple classes and types have since been developed, each with its own unique curing method and structure. However, the basic idea of curing tobacco using heat and/or air has always been an important step in tobacco production.

A much longer account was published by William Tatham, in his Essay on the Culture and Commerce of Tobacco published in 1800 based on his two decades of observance beginning in 1769 at the age of seventeen; in addition to his own accounts he included descriptions recorded by earlier observers from as early as 1724. His account is not only the most extensive account from the time period, but it is important to my work because the production and marketing methods that he observed were those that were practiced as tobacco farmers were beginning to settle in what, in 1792, became the Commonwealth of Kentucky. As planters moved west to what is now Kentucky, “the broad outline of the cultural technology of Burley leaf had already become established in Virginia and was carried whole into Kentucky” (Axton 30). In addition to farm practices, the complex system of state control of the sale of the crop was “carried whole” into the territory.

The system of slavery was also carried into the territory. As early as 1751, as the territory was being explored, “[b]lacks and whites entered Kentucky together” (Lucas xi). Later (and most famously) Daniel Boone brought slaves on his explorations of the territory in the 1770s (see Lucas). The role of slavery on colonial plantations is widely known, and it is central to the story of tobacco in American history. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, a number of factors led to a shift from white immigrant servants to African slaves in the major tobacco-producing region surrounding the Chesapeake Bay;

by 1700, farmers in the Chesapeake region were wholly dependent on the labor of slaves in the production of tobacco (Kulikoff 38). According to Joseph C. Robert, a mid-twentieth century tobacco historian, tobacco “created the plantation pattern. Its labor requirements soon meant hordes of African slaves. Present-day rural and racial problems below the Mason and Dixon Line are rooted in that first Southern staple, tobacco” (15).

With this in mind, the dependence on slave labor seems oddly missing from the historiography of Kentucky tobacco history as it has been written. This is in part due to the fact that “after the Revolution, when nearly all the good land in piedmont had been taken up ... dissatisfied poor farmers had to leave for Kentucky to find greater opportunities” (Kulikoff 119). Many of the farmers who moved to Kentucky and came to depend on tobacco income were small, poor farmers who did not own slaves; Kentucky’s was not a plantation culture. However, as Ann E. Kingsolver notes, the Kentucky historical narrative often ignores Kentucky’s slave-holding past (focusing instead on Kentucky’s status as a border state during the Civil War), and tobacco “has been glossed as a family-based cash crop” (93).<sup>14</sup> According to Steven A. Channing in Kentucky: A Bicentennial History, although “[i]t would be misleading to overlook the feature that most distinguished Kentucky from the lower South, namely the absence of a substantial number of very large plantations,” “it is possible to exaggerate the importance of that comparative difference. Apologists developed a powerful mystique around it, using that to argue that slavery was relatively inconsequential” (95). While slavery was a much bigger part of the history of the Western portion of the state—where the land is flatter and farms larger, and the culture often described by Kentuckians as more “Southern”—there

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<sup>14</sup> Kingsolver writes that she was taught as a child in her Kentucky school that there were no slaves in the county in which she lived. Her research proved otherwise.

were slaves on farms across the state, including the Bluegrass region which became the center of burley production.

Throughout the late eighteenth century, marketing centers were built along river ways, primarily the Kentucky and the Ohio; three inspection warehouses were built in the Kentucky district in 1783, and fourteen more were built there before Kentucky gained statehood (Robert 52). The locating of markets near rivers was important because at this time tobacco was pressed or *prized* into large wooden casks called “hogsheads,” weighing a thousand pounds or more. These were conveyed by carts or wagons, or they were rolled to the warehouses where they were opened and the tobacco inspected. Kentucky towns and cities grew from the establishment of tobacco marketing centers and “tobacco roads” were created by the rolling of hogsheads to the markets (Greene 15-16). When Kentucky officially entered the union, one of the first acts of the new legislature was to adopt the Virginia system of warehouses and leaf inspectors (Axton 44) that had been established “under the kingly government of Virginia” (Tatham 69). Upon inspection, if a hogshead of tobacco was determined to be of good quality it was reprized, and the farmer was given a note which then stood in for the tobacco during subsequent sales in what was really a consignment system (Robert 26). If it was determined to be of bad quality, it was burned (Tatham 79-81). Once sold, Kentucky tobacco was loaded onto boats and taken to the Port of New Orleans, opened to American commerce in 1795, from where it made its way to manufacturing plants in Europe and, later, the Eastern United States (Axton).

Although tobacco continued to be produced in Kentucky in the early nineteenth century, it was not until the 1830s, when a canal was built around the Falls of the Ohio at



Louisville in order to provide a consistent and safe route, that Kentucky began to take its place as a major producer of tobacco as well as hemp (Axton 48). Even then, however, tobacco production continued to center around the rivers, and very little was produced in the Bluegrass Region where much of my fieldwork took place. At this time, new strains of red burley were being developed, leaf quality was improving, and by 1865 Kentucky was the top producer of tobacco in the nation (Axton 51).

Generally, the mid-nineteenth century was the time in which tobacco production began to splinter into multiple types of tobacco, settling into particular regions based on climate and soil conditions; these region-specific patterns remain today, although this is beginning to change due to the end of the allotment system in 2004. Cigar tobaccos (binders, wrappers, and fillers) remained concentrated in the North (the Connecticut Valley, small portions of New York and Pennsylvania) as well as small parts of Georgia and Florida; flue-cured or bright tobacco became concentrated in the Carolinas and Georgia; dark-fired (which remains the most consistent with tobacco production of colonial times; see Morgan) settled in far Western Kentucky and Northwestern Tennessee; burley settled in Kentucky and parts of Tennessee; Maryland retained its own air-cured type; and a small region of Louisiana, centered in Saint James Parish, became the home of a specialized type, primarily used in pipe tobacco, Perique tobacco.

The importance of burley tobacco, which had become dominant in Kentucky as it spread to the central region, grew as chewing tobacco became the most widespread method of consumption in the United States because burley was a primary ingredient. The move to “chaw” during the first half of the nineteenth century was fostered in large part by the desire on the part of Americans to separate themselves from what were seen

as elite and effeminate European ways; as the masculine hero became the frontiersman, a “man of manly independence” (Axton 58; see also Kimmel), and the “common man” “reined supreme,” chewing spread up the class ladder (Robert 103). Chewing tobacco was the “only one of our tobacco customs which did not originate in the conscious imitation of European manners” (Robert 102). But, the Civil War also had both direct and indirect effects on Kentucky’s move to the top of tobacco production.

One important piece of the historiography of tobacco is the idea that throughout tobacco’s history “warfare has been the single most significant influence on the worldwide propagation of a taste” for tobacco (Axton 57). In stories often told about Union and Confederate soldiers meeting in the darkness between battles to exchange news and provisions, it is said that Confederate soldiers traded their chewing tobacco for Union coffee because of the shortages of each in their respective regions (Axton 71; Robert 120). As a result, the northern appetite for chewing tobacco grew.

At the same time, because Kentucky was a border state it was largely spared the devastation of states that had joined the Confederacy, which meant that during and after the war Kentucky tobacco farmers had a distinct advantage over their counterparts in confederate states such as Virginia and North Carolina, where farms and warehouses had largely been destroyed, as had centers of marketing and manufacturing (Axton 62). Louisville, the center of the market of the West at the time, also came through the war relatively unscathed unlike its potential competitors including Nashville, Atlanta, and Birmingham (Axton 65); meanwhile, New York became a marketing center for the sale of tobacco produced in Union states (Robert 116). Virginia never recovered its share of tobacco marketing and manufacturing, while North Carolina more than recovered its

share. North Carolina surpassed Kentucky in total tobacco poundage after 1929, as bright tobacco became the type in highest demand, although Kentucky remained the largest producer of burley and dark tobaccos and the U.S. state most dependent on tobacco income.

Another development just before the war ended was instrumental in establishing Kentucky's place in the tobacco industry ever more firmly—the discovery of White Burley. The burley tobacco leaf that was being grown at the time was a harsh red variety. The story of White Burley—Kentucky burley's origin narrative—is recounted in nearly all histories of tobacco with an accompanying explanation that it was one of the rarest of moments in the natural world, called a “sport” or “a sudden deviation from a standard type” (Robert 185-86; see also van Willigen and Eastwood 11-12, Axton 69-70, Robert 185-86, Herndon 409).<sup>15</sup> Of course, that it literally grew out of such rare circumstances only serves to stress the role of the leaf in the Kentucky economy and culture as a fated one (even though the story only centers in part on Kentucky). Oddly, perhaps, this story was never recounted to me orally.

The story goes that the tenants of a Brown County, Ohio, tobacco producer named Fred Kantz ran out of seed and bought some from a Bracken County, Kentucky, farmer, named George Barkley.<sup>16</sup> The tenants planted the seeds in their seed beds, and when it came time to set the plants in the field they didn't look right—they were “dirty yellow in

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<sup>15</sup> Flue-cured tobacco, too, has an origin narrative, in which a slave named Stephen accidentally discovered the benefits of curing bright tobacco with indirect heat (flues) rather than direct heat (cf. Greene 19).

<sup>16</sup> The version recounted in Greene begins with, “Just how [the discovery of white burley] took place is unclear. One tradition says that a congressman gave some unusual seeds to a farmer in Bracken County, KY. Was this gift to appease growers so recently angered by Congress's tobacco tax efforts? In any case, that farmer was George W. Barkley, and the seedlings he produced on his northern Kentucky farm were known as ‘little burley’” (22). From there, Greene tells the same story as Axton, Robert, Herndon, van Willigen and Eastwood, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, and others.

color” although “sturdy enough” (Axton 69)—so they were destroyed. The next year, one of the tenants, George Webb, planted leftover seeds, resulting in a leaf that “cured out to a handsome, almost golden, light tan or cream leaf” (Axton 69). The following year, he raised twenty-thousand pounds of it; it was praised by buyers, and it took off and “positively thrived” in the Bluegrass Region (Axton 70) beginning in the 1870s (Robert 186). In addition to its appeal to buyers, White Burley required a shorter growing season, the entire stalk could be harvested at once (*stalk-cut*) rather than requiring multiple passes through the field harvesting the leaves as they matured (*primed*), and it could be air-cured rather than fire-cured.

White Burley was so appealing to manufacturers because it had characteristics that made it ideal for chewing and pipe tobaccos; there was less sugar in the leaf, so it absorbed sweeteners that were added to it for flavoring and helped it to blend well with other tobaccos. In addition, “[t]he chewing public came to demand that the ‘quid’ [or plug] be pleasing to the eye as well as the taste,” hence manufacturers’ growing desire for “light-colored or ‘yellow’ tobacco” for plug wrappers (Herndon 417).<sup>17</sup> These characteristics would also later make it an essential part of the American blended cigarette. Between 1865 and 1929, Kentucky produced more tobacco, by pound, than any other state (Axton 51).

Changes in tobacco marketing took place from the 1830s through the 1890s, as auctions became “institutionalized,” and farmers began to move away from packing their tobacco in hogsheads (Daniel 31). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was

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<sup>17</sup> “Yellow tobacco” is today a descriptive term used with disdain in regard to a bad crop. This is one example of the drastic changes that have taken place in terms of the qualities that the tobacco companies look for, and one of the ways they have maintained control by not only changing their demands but maintaining a shroud of mystery around the types of tobacco they are looking for and why.

growing distrust of the “tobacco note” that had long served as the representation of a hogshead of tobacco as it was bought and sold, and by the 1830s the auction system was developing as buyers began buying directly from farmers immediately following the inspection of their tobacco (Herndon 435; Robert 68). Looseleaf sales (rather than sale in hogsheads) were introduced in Kentucky and Tennessee in 1901 (Herndon 436), and the practice of packing hands of tobacco onto baskets—rather than piles on the floor—at the warehouse was established in Lexington in 1904 (Axton 86) and would remain the standard marketing practice until the early 1980s; even today, this practice remains the iconic image of tobacco sales. The last hogsheads sales in the burley region took place during the 1929-1930 marketing season in Louisville (Robert 200).

### **The Creation of the Tobacco Trust and Trouble in the Black Patch**

Tobacco overproduction became a central and consistent element of the tobacco narrative immediately following John Rolfe’s first planting of the crop in Jamestown in 1612, and with the concept of overproduction came governmental monitoring and intervention. Tobacco histories focus on the pervasiveness of conflict since the beginnings of colonial production, and the tobacco historiography acts as a classic American narrative of the individual’s fight against corporate greed. In this narrative, the small planters are in an ongoing battle with the giant companies, but the planters have trouble understanding their own best interests, and therefore government intervention is required. As early as 1613—just the second year of cultivation at Jamestown—deputy governor Thomas Dale “ordered that no man could raise tobacco unless he also each season manured and maintained two acres of corn,” out of fear of yet another failed colony (Robert 8).

According to William Tatham, as early as 1620 King James I ordered colonists to limit tobacco production and instead plant corn and potatoes and raise livestock (252) and the first legislation ever passed regarding tobacco commerce, in 1639, addressed the need to limit tobacco production (148-178). Over-production was at the heart of the 1670s event known as Bacon's Rebellion, and in 1682 there were "plant cutting riots" in which planters cut their own and their neighbors' tobacco when the Virginia Assembly refused to impose production limits (Robert 11-12).

While the relationship between farmers and the tobacco industry had been a tumultuous one beginning with the strife between planters and British merchants, the conflict was intensified beginning in the 1870s as manufacturing became consolidated, and national advertising campaigns were launched. Until the late nineteenth century, tobacco products were largely produced by "country factories," everyone from merchants to planters produced chew for sale at the regional level (Robert 79). Gradually, cities such as St. Louis and New York as well as towns in North Carolina became centers of manufacturing; rags-to-riches stories "in good Horatio Alger, Jr. fashion" were told about the manufacture of tobacco products at the end of the nineteenth century (Robert 133-34). It was 1890, however, when the biggest change in tobacco product manufacturing occurred, with the establishment of the American Tobacco Company "under the guiding hand of J.B. Duke" (Axton 82), the son of a poor planter made rich through home manufacture and traveling sales of tobacco products beginning just after the Civil War (Robert 138). "The Trust," as it came to be called, was made up of the largest tobacco manufacturing companies, and they rapidly achieved a monopoly in the industry through

rampant price wars that drove their competitors “not out of business, but into joining the Trust,” which ultimately subsumed over 250 manufacturers (Axton 83).

The formation of the Trust, along with other factors, resulted in drastic price reductions, and farmers attempted to overcome shrinking farm incomes through increased production; increased production led to over-production which served to drop the prices further—benefiting the Trust further, of course, while hurting the farmer. One result was the “Black Patch Wars,” which most famously took place in the Black Patch region of far western Kentucky and Tennessee, where dark-fired tobacco production was and continues to be concentrated. The dark-fired growers had seen the most drastic price reductions as the demand for their product dropped, as domestic tobacco consumption began to move away from chewing tobaccos to smoking tobaccos at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> The first attempt to build a cooperative association to fight the growing power of the Trust took place in this region in 1904 with what became the Dark-fired Tobacco District Planters’ Protective Association of Kentucky and Tennessee; alongside this organization, a secret association was formed and became known as the Night Riders. Beginning in 1906, the Night Riders organized themselves “with robes and masks, and [with an] elaborate paramilitary hierarchy operating as an outlaw underground army” that “coerced reluctant leaf planters to join...flogged still others, dragged plant beds, burned barns and houses, killed some...” (Axton 91). They also burned warehouses and manufacturing facilities in the towns of Princeton and Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

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<sup>18</sup> And interestingly, demand for dark-fired tobacco has increased in recent years as “smokeless” tobacco is gaining in popularity as a less harmful means of consuming tobacco. Snuff consumption in the U.S. is currently rising 4-6% annually (Snell “Burley and Dark Tobaccos”).

Although the activities of the Night Riders in the dark-fired region have been most widely documented (including multiple fictional accounts, most notably Robert Penn Warren's Night Rider), there were similar movements in the central and northern Kentucky regions as well, as older farmers of these regions often reminded me during my fieldwork. In these other regions, the tactics of the Night Riders "appear more successful and somewhat less violent" (van Willigen and Eastwood 41), although I was told oral accounts of violence and murder that have been passed through families. The activities of the Night Riders ended around 1908, in large part because of legal action taken against them by their victims; by this time the public had turned against them because of their violent tactics. In 1911, the Trust was dissolved by the U.S. Supreme Court, as a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890. However, out of the Trust came "The Big Four" companies—American Tobacco Company, Liggett and Myers, Lorillard, and R.J. Reynolds—and the turbulent times were far from over.

Kentucky tobacco increased in importance with the birth of the American blend cigarette introduced by R.J. Reynolds in 1913 with the Camel brand. With Camels, came a cigarette blend that "revolutionize[d] the cigarette field" (Wagner 49) and further increased the demand for burley (van Willigen and Eastwood 13). Though particular blends have been trade secrets over the years, the "American blend" cigarette—replacing the Turkish blend of the nineteenth century, which was actually about 60% domestic tobacco (not including burley) and 40% Turkish—generally includes about 50-60% flue-cured or bright tobacco, 30-35% burley, 10% Turkish tobaccos and about 2% Maryland leaf (KDA, Kentucky Marketing Bulletin April 1947:7). Camels were followed by the American Tobacco Company's Lucky Strikes in 1918 and Liggett and Myers'



Chesterfields in 1919, all “American” blends. With these brands, the companies also ushered in the era, still with us, of “concentrated one-brand advertising” (Robert 233).

The First World War helped to spread these new cigarettes, and tobacco prices soared to all time highs, ranging from twenty-five to thirty cents a pound (Robert 201). This height, however, was followed by a bad crop year in 1920, and prices plummeted to an average of thirteen cents a pound in the Lexington burley market. Once again, farmers were angered and determined to band together, and during this period cooperative associations were formed for each of the tobacco classes, in order to pressure the companies into paying more for the crop. The Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association was formed in 1921 with the membership goal of 75% of all burley growers. These efforts were successful for a few years, with prices reaching over twenty-eight cents a pound in 1922 (Axton 105), but by 1926 the efforts were failing, the crop was not cooperatively managed, and the price dropped back to twelve and a half cents (van Willigen and Eastwood 50). As the Great Depression hit, not only were prices low, but demand for cigarettes fell, and by 1931 burley brought about eight and a half cents a pound and dark-fired three cents (Axton 109). Attempts to revive cooperative associations during this period failed (Robert 207-8).

Axton notes that “One small planter, who had netted \$325.00 for his 1919 crop, came away in 1921 with just \$2.75” (105). According to van Willigen and Eastwood, farmers “tell stories from their fathers and grandfathers about selling tobacco for less than the cost of taking the product to market” (40), and in fact, I was told a number of variants of such stories during my fieldwork, some of which were about particular people (usually family members), while others were unnamed farmers. A version of one particular story

told to me multiple times was recounted by Joseph Robert in his history of tobacco first published in 1949:

At the beginning of the 1931 marketing season, farmers were chuckling over the story of the foresighted Negro who, in Blackshear Georgia, put up for auction a small hamper of tobacco, which sold for less than the warehouse fees. He was told that he owed 50 cents on the transaction, a sum which he did not have. “Well,” said the warehouseman, “just bring me a chicken next time you come to town.” The following day the Negro appeared with *two* chickens. When told he owed just one, he replied, “I know that boss, but I done brought another hamper of terbacker and I brought this extra chicken to pay you for selling it!” (207)

The versions I was told differ primarily in that the race of the farmer was not mentioned—I was told the story by white farmers, and presumably the farmer in the story was also white since his race was not specified—and the tobacco is a “load” rather than a “hamper.” These are quite significant changes. The first, by losing the detail of race, makes the story about any farmer rather than a story with racist assumptions about a black farmer too ignorant to understand his mistake. The second detail, shifting “hamper” to “load” changes the magnitude of the loss by making the story about a small amount of tobacco which might more easily be sold for less than a fixed warehouse cost become a story about a large amount of tobacco, with the implication of even lower prices.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This actually suggests that although these stories appear similar their messages are very different, and this is further illuminated by other stories I was told. Robert’s version—racism aside—may actually have a lot in common with stories that I was told about small yields in bad crop years. For instance, Wilbert Perkins told me a story about his father fitting his entire crop in the backseat of the car one year and not being able to pay off a loan of \$100 that he’d taken from his uncle because he only got \$50 for his crop. On the other hand, all of the versions of the chicken story—Roberts’ and mine—have a central element of the farmer as the buffoon (although an alternative reading might also see a critique of the warehouseman rather than the farmer). This is a theme in other jokes and stories that I was told—including one in which a watermelon farmer deals with the low prices he’s getting for his watermelons by growing more watermelon (exactly what tobacco farmers have done and are doing today) and stories in which a farmer wins the lottery and when asked what he’s going to do with the winnings replies “I reckon I’ll just go home and farm until I run out of money.”

Wendell Berry has also told a version of this story, in which his father as a little boy witnesses his father selling his tobacco and coming home “without a dime. They took it all. The crop...about paid the

A second story was told to me on two occasions at the 2007 Kentucky Folklife Festival by Charlie Long (who also told me the above story at some point), once informally and later the same day during a narrative stage about tobacco farming. Sometime in the 30s or 40s (the implication being pre-program), a farmer went to sell his tobacco.<sup>20</sup> He didn't make any money once he'd paid his warehouse fees so he couldn't pay the grocer what he owed from the previous year. So he sold a cow, but he only made a nickel on it. He was given a check for a five cents and he brought it to the grocer to show him that he couldn't pay him, and the grocer was so taken aback by a check for five cents that he bought the check from him. In the version he told me on stage, the grocer gave him the nickel for the check and put the check on display under the glass on his

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warehouse commission." His ends there, however, but he adds the important coda: "My father saw men leave the warehouse crying and he said, when he was a little boy, 'If I can ever do anything about this, I'm going to'" (as quoted in Smith 11). His father, John Berry, went on to play a major role in the establishment of the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association. Berry's version is not told in joke form, but rather serves as an origin story for his family's legacy of involvement in both tobacco and (in his case) advocating for small farmers.

A comparative reading of these narratives is fruit for a future paper.

<sup>20</sup> The date or even the decade of the beginning of the tobacco program, discussed below, is not something that most tobacco growers I have interviewed know, and so variants of all these stories are vaguely situated in time as "early in the century" or "sometime" in the 20s, 30s, or 40s. Interestingly growers are similarly vague about the period in which the Night Riders were active. While this is clearly an example of the way that the tobacco narrative has been constructed differently in oral and written versions, it also might be understood in terms of Alessandro Portelli's argument that "false" memories have much to teach us about the meanings of events in people's lives and even what constitutes an "event." In an examination of a chronological shift in people's memories about the killing of a worker in Terni, Italy, Portelli argues that the date was remembered wrong because what traditional historiography might count as a single and isolated event may be only a portion of a series of "events" that come together to form a person's (or community's) understanding of the event. It seems to me that the events of the Night Riders and the creation of the Burley Co-op and the tobacco program are similarly collapsed into one event, and, further, there is understood to be a cause and effect relationship (the program and the Co-op were created because of the Black Patch Wars). Since in fact the "events" took place over a 30-year period (the Black Patch Wars in 1906-1908, the Co-op formation in 1921, and the program created through the AAA first in 1933 but more permanently in 1938) knowledge of the actual dates only creates confusion; it makes more sense that they would have happened during the same period. Of course this differs from Portelli's work in that these are historical events that the individuals I worked with did not experience first-hand (because they were either not living or too young to be fully aware of them); so although this mis-remembering might best be understood through a lens of historical legend, Portelli's argument remains useful. I also encountered similar vagueness around the dates of more recent events, particularly the changes in tobacco marketing that took place in the late 70s and early 80s, described in the next chapter.

counter. This story further develops the low tobacco prices by showing that even the diversified farmer couldn't make it because the bottom had also fallen out of the cattle market. The second version, in which the grocer puts the check on display, represents what may have been a common practice related more directly to tobacco, as van Willigen and Eastwood include a photograph in their Tobacco Culture of a check written to a tobacco farmer for ten cents in the 1920s, and Jerry Rankin showed me a framed 1938 floor sheet (or re receipt for auctioned tobacco) hanging in the lobby area of his tobacco warehouse.<sup>21</sup> Stories such as these argue that there was a drastic need for a solution to the problems of overproduction and the control of the industry by a handful of large corporations, and such stories may serve to justify the renewal of government monitoring through the creation of the tobacco program by arguing that farmers could no longer be expected to fight the giant companies on their own.<sup>22</sup> Told today, in an age in which the program no longer exists, these stories may express fears that such days will return.

### **The New Deal Ushers in the Tobacco Program**

With "Franklin D. Roosevelt's eventful first hundred days of New Deal legislation," came the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 (known as the AAA), which "focused on wheat, cotton, field corn, hogs, rice, milk, and tobacco and provided for restricted production and benefit payments to the farmer" (van Willigen and Eastwood 52). This

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<sup>21</sup> Jerry showed me this receipt with a comment about low prices, but in fact 1938 prices were high as a result of the tobacco program (discussed in the next section), and the prices on this receipt for various grades include prices of 19 and 29 cents per pound. So this receipt may have originally been saved (and perhaps framed) because it was a good year after nearly two decades of turmoil, but it is now viewed by Jerry as proof of low prices.

<sup>22</sup> Melissa Walker (Southern Farmers and Their Stories) has examined farmers' expressions of conflicting feelings about their dependence on government programs. Daniel, Danbom, and others have described the contradictions in government farm policy beginning with the New Deal and resulting conflicting impacts of government intervention on farmers.

act was struck down in 1937, and a new version passed in 1938 (Greene 56-57); various amendments have been added over the years. With the passage of the Agriculture Adjustment Act of 1938, all tobacco growers were “permitted to vote through referendum [every three years] to impose production quotas in return for a supported price” (BTGCA vii).<sup>23</sup> The USDA was also charged with creating a system of inspection and outlining a structure for the uniform grading of tobacco by government graders through the Tobacco Inspection Act of 1935 (van Willigen and Eastwood 53; Robert 212) which, in essence, strengthened 1916 and 1929 legislation by making uniform grading and inspection mandatory at no cost to the farmer (Greene 56). Those who had grown tobacco in the years leading up to the passage of the AAA were given a “base” or “allotment”: a precise number of acres of tobacco that could be grown and sold on each farm without penalty, based on how much had been raised on that farm in the years prior to the program. This base was then readjusted annually dependent on the projected demand of the tobacco companies, and support prices were set for each grade.<sup>24</sup> So although the government now monitored production, in actuality the companies maintained control of production levels and to a large degree, prices.

Each year, government officials went to every farm on which tobacco was raised and measured the acreage, destroying any part of a crop that exceeded that grower’s allotment. Under this system, growers worked to raise the most tobacco they could on their allotted acreage since it was later sold by the pound, making every leaf valuable.

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<sup>23</sup> I am only dealing with burley tobacco here, unless otherwise noted, as there were slight differences in the handling of different types of tobacco.

<sup>24</sup> Because tobacco is usually aged for about three years before it is used, companies in fact estimated their needs three or more years in the future.

Carolyn Taylor described a common practice that she and her daughters were responsible for in the 1950s and 60s during tobacco cutting and housing season:

So early in the morning, we would go to the field, the girls and I, and we'd pick up any leaves that we thought were good. And this is when we were not on poundage see this is when we were on acreage and you wanted to get every bit of tobacco off of the field that you could [...] So we'd go and we'd pick them up and put them in um [...] I think we had a big, sheet or something, we laid 'em in that and then we just four-cornered it and brought it in, the barn and then we'd, we'd come to the house, and start cookin'...<sup>25</sup>

The tobacco program generally stabilized tobacco production for several decades, even through times such as the Second World War and the post-War period. Once again, war proved to usher in a boom time for tobacco, as World War II spread the American cigarette around the globe. In April 1947, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, in their newsletter, praised American G.I.s for their “tremendous promotional job... They have distributed American cigarettes all over the world” (Kentucky Marketing Bulletin 7). American cigarette consumption rose 75% between 1939 and 1945, particularly consumption by groups notoriously targeted by the tobacco companies: women, soldiers, and teens (Axton 116).

Both tobacco production and the prices that companies were paying to farmers were high during the war, and in the winter of 1944-45, the outlook for burley tobacco as reported in the KDA news was good. There was a cigarette shortage in 1944 that merited a congressional investigation, and according to the KDA, “Just who is too blame” “is difficult to determine” (Kentucky Marketing Bulletin Jan. 1945, 1; see also Robert 269).

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<sup>25</sup> According to her daughter, Diana Taylor, they would then string the leaves on wire and hang them in the barn to cure, and Carolyn and her daughters would receive the money for those leaves when it sold. This is the only form of cash compensation that Diana remembers receiving when she was growing up, although she and her sister participated in other parts of the tobacco production and other farm chores.

Huge crops were grown in 1945, and so by 1946 prices dropped and there were debates over whether or not to lower quotas. In January 1946, the KDA noted that “The recent slump of burley tobacco prices has caused grave concern among all Kentuckians for this crop is more than any other the basis of Kentucky prosperity” (Kentucky Marketing Bulletin 2), reflecting a recognition of the economic importance of tobacco.

Although it has been argued that tobacco production techniques and marketing procedures, unlike those of commodities such as cotton, changed little as a result of the AAA (Daniel 184), acreage allotments encouraged a rapid growth in average yields over the decades through not only the careful collection of each leaf, but also the development of new techniques and varieties and the application of new synthetic fertilizers. The Kentucky Department of Agriculture reported that in 1960, the average was 1600 pounds to the acre and in 1970, it was 2600 (Kentucky Agricultural News April 1971, 1), and, in fact, yields tripled between 1939 and 1971 (Axton 120). The research that led to the sharp increases in yields was described by one former long-time Burley Co-op president, John Berry, Sr., as “cruel economics and blind scientific endeavor” because higher yields led to more tobacco at lower prices, ultimately leading to more work for the farmer at lower wages (BTGCA 86; see also Daniel on cotton 245). The industry continued to be plagued by over-production, and quotas rose and fell over the years.

When it came time for farmers to sell their tobacco at auctions that took place at tobacco warehouses, if buyers (either representing specific tobacco companies or “leaf buyers” that bought tobacco for multiple manufacturers worldwide) were not willing to bid at least a penny above the support price for individual piles of tobacco, than that tobacco went to “the pool.” The Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association was

revived in 1941 to manage the burley pool stocks, paying farmers for tobacco that was not bought at auction with money borrowed from the Commodity Credit Corporation of the USDA and later paid back with interest when the tobacco was sold. Farmers and others on the production end are quick to point out that unlike other commodity programs, the tobacco program was not a subsidy program, and although there were administrative costs associated with it, the government more than gained that back through interest gained on loans to the pool. Although farmers often say that the program meant that if their tobacco was not bid on at auction *the government bought it*, they are also quick to clarify that it was bought by the Co-op *on loan*. In the 1970s and early 1980s, as the political climate for tobacco production changed, there were increasing accusations that tobacco was subsidized by tax payer money. It was for this reason that, in 1982, Congress passed “no-net-cost” legislation that instituted a system of fees paid by farmers and tobacco companies in order to ensure that all costs associated with the tobacco program were covered entirely by the industry (Daniel 269).

In 1971, when there was once again too much burley being raised and an abundance of tobacco in the pool stocks, growers passed a referendum that changed the acreage quota system to a poundage system, and at the same time they agreed to a quota reduction.<sup>26</sup> This meant that farmers could raise as many acres of tobacco as they wanted to in order to raise an allotted number of pounds. This can be seen as one link in a chain of events that lessened the value of each individual leaf of tobacco and therefore changed traditional practices designed to preserve the full value of each leaf (van Willigen and

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<sup>26</sup> There were three failed attempts in the late 1960s to move to poundage. The successful 1971 referendum gave them the choice of accepting the poundage system and quota cuts or losing support prices all together. (KDA, Kentucky Agricultural News April 1971, 1). Flue-cured had gone to poundage several years earlier.



Eastwood interpret it in this way, 61). Yet, an argument was being made by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture during the push for a move from acreage to poundage that it would result in *better* quality tobacco because farmers were overusing fertilizers in order to get the most out of their allotted acreage (Kentucky Department of Agriculture Bulletin February 1966, 2). However it is interpreted, yields gradually dropped to an average of 2100 (Snell, Powers, and Halich 5), although 3500 pounds to the acre is not unheard of today.

For most of the years of the program, a tobacco marketing quota could only be obtained through the purchase of land that came with one, and because tobacco allotments were attached to land, and most pieces of property in Kentucky had an allotment, however small, land values were heavily influenced by the amount of tobacco base that came with a piece of land. I've been told repeatedly that banks approved farm mortgages based on tobacco allotments, since a tobacco income was guaranteed income. The ability to lease quota from another farm within the same county—to grow someone else's tobacco—was granted to farmers in 1971. There had long been a sharecropping and tenant system in which growers engaged in various leasing arrangements, such as *on shares* (meaning one farmer raised another's tobacco for a share of the crop that varied depending on who supplied the inputs such as seed, fertilizers, equipment and barns, labor, etc.) or *on halves* (a sharing relationship in which the landowner and tenant split the in-puts and profits evenly). Beginning in 1971, farmers were given a means of raising more tobacco than the marketing quota that they owned by leasing quota belonging to other farmers outright and paying a per-pound lease price; these arrangements also varied, but by 2004 some paid as much as eighty or ninety cents a

pound for the right to raise someone else's tobacco.<sup>27</sup> This also meant that a class of non-producing quota owners was born, so that for instance older farmers, widows, non-farmers who bought a farm that had some quota, and even businesses and institutions such as schools and churches came to depend on leasing tobacco allotments as a source of income. Beginning in 1991, it was possible to buy quota separate from a parcel of land within the county in which you lived (van Willigen and Eastwood 60).<sup>28</sup>

The tobacco price support program was often described as the “most successful farm program ever enacted by the Congress of the United States” (BTGCA viii). The program ended with the Fair and Equitable Tobacco Reform Act of 2004 (within the American Jobs Creation Act of 2004), understood to be “one of the most dramatic changes in any U.S. agricultural policy over the last half century, as tobacco now has the distinction of being the only government-supported commodity to move abruptly to an entirely free-market policy” (Tiller). I will return to this legislation, known as *the buyout*, later in this chapter.

### **The Wars on Tobacco**

Tobacco use was criticized beginning with first European contact. King James I published a Counterblaste to Tobacco in 1604, and when that did not stop the spread of its use throughout England he imposed heavy taxes. This “if you can't beat it, benefit from it” approach to tobacco—or as one historian called it, “administrative schizophrenia” (Robert xiv)—continues today. Movements against tobacco use rose and

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<sup>27</sup> Lease costs varied significantly by county, according to demand.

<sup>28</sup> The ability to lease or buy quota in other counties, known as *cross-county leasing*, was a subject of contentious debate right up to the end of the program in 2004; it was voted on numerous times by growers and never passed. The argument against it was that only the largest farmers would benefit.

fell in the centuries following James, and the first “significant” anti-tobacco tract published in the United States was published in 1798 (Robert 106). Well known Americans such as Horace Mann, Henry Ward Beecher, and Horace Greeley, and later Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, were anti-tobacco proponents, as were the official organizations of Methodists and Quakers (Robert 106-7). In 1902, the Quakers condemned “the grant of public money for use in research concerning growing and curing tobacco,” and despite what had been an ongoing split between Northern and Southern Methodists on the issue, in 1914 the Methodist Conference forbade “candidates for the ministry from smoking” (Robert 170-71).<sup>29</sup> The movement against tobacco use in the U.S. sped up in the early 1900s (Wagner 68) and became attached to the Prohibition movement; several states banned the sale and public use of tobacco, and the anti-tobacco movement even served as the platform of Lucy Page Gaston’s 1920 run for president (Robert 247-50).<sup>30</sup>

Widespread public acceptance of the negative health effects of tobacco finally began to take hold in the 1950s and particularly the 1960s. In 1954, “the first cigarette cancer scare coincided with the introduction of the modern filtered cigarette” (Axton 116), which was actually an improvement on filters that had been used in the past. This came in the form of a report released by the American Cancer Society to the American Medical Association which was taken quite seriously by the public (Wagner 78), resulting in a dip in sales and in tobacco allotments (Axton 125). But the major blow to

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<sup>29</sup> Robert quotes a Southern Methodist’s comments in the Reconstruction Period: “Those Northern Methodists...are engaged in a general crusade against tobacco. That is our Southern staple, and our churches are largely supported by it” (171).

<sup>30</sup> Gaston, a former member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, became a leader of the anti-tobacco movement beginning in the 1890s (Robert 169).

tobacco came with the 1964 Surgeon General's report on the dangers of smoking; importantly, this is a turning point recognized by many of those that I interviewed.

The report, issued on a Saturday for fear of immediate repercussions on the stock market, made a connection between tobacco use and lung cancer that was taken more seriously by American consumers than any previous expression of belief about the ill effects of tobacco use (cf. Wagner). It included the statement that "Cigarette smoking is a health hazard of sufficient importance in the United States to warrant appropriate remedial action" (as quoted in Wagner 130). This was followed, in 1965, by a required warning label on cigarette packages that stated (as a result of concessions to the tobacco companies) simply that "Cigarette Smoking may be hazardous to your health" (Wagner 164), and a ban on cigarette advertising on broadcast television was put into place in 1971 (Wagner 217).

Consumption dipped in 1964, and there were severe allotment cuts around the same time, primarily because of massive over-production in 1963 (BTGCA 86-87). Tobacco companies rushed to buy other manufacturing concerns in order to protect both their image and their finances with Philip Morris in the lead, buying up subsidiaries that made everything "from chewing gum and razor blades to beer" (Axton 120).<sup>31</sup> The demand for cigarettes continued, however. In 1973, leaf prices hit a record average of ninety-three cents a pound, and in 1974, there was a burley shortage (Axton 125). Although pro-tobacco associations began to organize in the late teens and early twenties

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<sup>31</sup> Although Philip Morris began to make cigarettes in London in the 1850s (Gately 185) the company did not become a major player in the US industry until the 1940s and 50s. The Marlboro brand first appeared in the 1920s, marketed as a woman's cigarette with the slogan "Mild as May" (Gately 244); it was not until the mid-1950s that the brand was re-made as a man's cigarette, with the Marlboro Man image becoming one of the most recognizable advertising campaigns in American history (277-78).

(see Robert 247), and the Tobacco Institute—which would become the major lobbying arm of the tobacco industry—was established in 1958 (Wagner 91), during this period additional lobbying organizations began to form in defense of the industry. Companies came up with new ways to stretch tobacco, such as “puffing” techniques and the inclusion of stems and other byproducts that had previously been discarded during the pre-manufacturing, or *redrying*, process. During the 1973-74 market, farmers accused the companies of “a conspiratorial system of allocations” that had replaced the tobacco auction (Axton 13). This too was neither new nor an isolated case, however, as farmers successfully sued the companies for collusion in the 1940s (see Robert 261-65), and additional lawsuits have been filed in the years since.

### **Continued Attacks on Tobacco**

The 1970s and 80s brought with them attacks on tobacco on many fronts. Numerous advocacy organizations formed, such as the Council for Burley Tobacco in 1971, because “the challenge of mounting defenses against anti-tobacco attacks promised to be a full-time job” (Greene 92). In 1973, tobacco farmers took part in the Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife, and this was understood by the Burley Auction Warehouse Association (at least in hindsight), who donated \$3000 toward the event, as a chance to send a “vivid message” “about the essential integrity and historic nature of a tobacco grower’s way of life” (Greene 96). There were multiple attempts to dismantle the tobacco program, such as an amendment to the 1981 farm bill that came one vote shy of passage; in 1982, “no-net-cost” legislation instituted a system of fees to cover the administrative

costs of the program in order to ensure that tax payers were not supporting tobacco production (Daniel 267-268).<sup>32</sup>

In addition to health issues, the greatest threats to tobacco—as perceived by farmers—included increases in excise taxes on tobacco products at the state and federal levels, attempts to make tobacco subject to regulation by the Food and Drug Administration, ever-increasing percentages of foreign-produced tobacco, and the continuing problem of overproduction. As previously mentioned, tobacco was a favorite source of tax revenue during colonial times although the United States government did not begin to tax it until 1862 (Greene 21), and growers over the centuries have viewed tax increases as a threat to their livelihood. By 1970, all fifty states imposed an excise tax on tobacco products (Capehart “Changing Tobacco User’s Dollar” 3). Taxes had the most direct impact on farmer livelihood at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, as tobacco growers faced steep taxes on the unmanufactured leaf (Greene 25). The tobacco companies have of course fought, often successfully, against increased excise taxes and have viewed them as a threat to the industry perhaps equal to the growing awareness of health effects (Robert xiii); they have also successfully mobilized farmers to fight such fights for them, through active campaigns to tie the interests of farmers with their own interests and put a sympathetic face on the industry.

Although tobacco remains an important source of income, few would be surprised to learn that what farmers earn is miniscule when compared to the profits of tobacco companies and to the earnings of federal and state governments. Between 1993 and 1998, for each dollar the consumer spent on tobacco products, manufacturers and retailers

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<sup>32</sup> A 1995 study found that a majority of Americans surveyed (55%) believed that taxpayers subsidized tobacco farmers (Altman et. al).

received 68%, excise taxes were 25%, and farmers earned 2% (Duncan “From the Golden Egg to Humpty Dumpty”). Due to price increases imposed by manufacturers in order to recoup the costs associated with the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement as well as increasing taxes, by 2003 each dollar spent by tobacco users broke down as follows: 72% went to manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers; 27% to sales and excise taxes; 1% to farmers (Capehart “Changing Tobacco User’s Dollar” 4). Since the 2004 buyout, poundage prices have dropped and taxes have continued to increase, and one can only assume that farmers’ percentage has dropped yet further.

The Clinton Administration was viewed by the tobacco industry as particularly determined to tax tobacco out of usage, and President Clinton was generally understood to be “the most anti- tobacco president in history” (Gibson).<sup>33</sup> Clinton paid a visit to Kentucky in 1998 to meet with farmers, assuring them that “We don't have to wreck the fabric of life in your community. We don't have to rob honest people of their way of life” (Gibson). In September 2000, the Clinton administration created the President’s Commission on Improving Economic Opportunity in Communities Dependent on Tobacco Production While Protecting Public Health. The title of this commission, perhaps among the longest titles in the history of presidential commissions, reflects the sensitivity of the issues with which the commission grappled. The Commission’s report, released in May of 2001, made a range of recommendations focused on revamping but not eliminating the tobacco program, providing financial compensation and technical

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<sup>33</sup> Blame for government attacks on tobacco often broke down along party lines among the farmers and warehousemen with whom I spoke. Republicans blamed President Clinton’s anti-smoking efforts and Democrats blamed Senator Mitch McConnell for being in the pocket of the industry rather than on the side of farmers. However, many placed some blame on both of these key political figures of recent years, particularly McConnell, who opposed earlier versions of buyout legislation that would have brought greater benefits to farmers.

assistance to encourage growers to diversify their farm operations, and supporting tobacco cessation programs (“Tobacco at a Crossroad”). The formation of this commission and their resulting recommendations represented one aspect of a movement in the 1980s and 90s to bring public health advocates and tobacco communities together on those issues that they could agree on, such as the economic consequences of a decline of tobacco markets and working to end youth tobacco use.

The \$206 billion Master Settlement Agreement reached in 1998, between the four largest American tobacco companies and 46 state Attorneys General, both symbolized and fortified the change in public attitudes regarding tobacco, as tobacco manufacturers settled with states that sought to recover medical costs associated with smoking-related illnesses.<sup>34</sup> The Master Settlement Agreement included two phases of monetary awards; Phase I monies were given to states to use as they saw fit, and Phase II monies provided annual payments to growers in order to compensate them for the expected decline in demand for tobacco.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the late 1990s, quotas rose and fell dramatically. In 1991, quotas were raised over 20%, followed by cuts at or below 10% until 1995, when they began to climb again. In 1999, farmers saw a 29% cut followed by a 45% cut in 2000 (Snell personal communication). Meanwhile, average quota lease prices increased from under thirty cents in 1997 to nearly seventy cents in 2002 (Snell “U.S. Tobacco Grower Issues”), as quota owners attempted to maintain their incomes. This period was perhaps

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<sup>34</sup> Only 46 states were included because Florida, Minnesota, Mississippi, and Texas had made prior, separate settlements.

<sup>35</sup> As I will discuss in a later chapter, Kentucky allocated 50% of the state’s Phase I monies to the support of agricultural diversification through the Kentucky Agricultural Development Board. The tobacco companies negotiated a deal into the tobacco buyout legislation that freed them of paying the remaining Phase II payments to farmers with the reasoning that the buyout payments that farmers would receive would replace Phase II payments. There is considerable resentment about this concession.



the most blatant period of rampant manipulation of the market by the tobacco companies, with quotas going up and down with little or no explanation from the companies, although it was well-known that they were increasingly purchasing tobaccos grown overseas. Again, although the USDA made official decisions about each year's quota, these decisions were based on industry-reported demand, and therefore the companies ultimately controlled quota increases or decreases.

In the year 2000, Philip Morris established what it called the Tobacco Farmer Partnering Program, through which it began encouraging growers to bypass the auction system and contract directly with the company, and in the following years other companies followed Philip Morris' lead. The advantage of direct contracting for farmers was that they saved the fees that were paid to the warehouse, netting them several cents a pound—a particularly attractive gain as they were coping with the loss of quota. This turn of events was controversial, however, as many growers and others on the production side feared the threat that it posed to the future of the tobacco program and to tobacco warehouses and those employed by them, while others accepted it as the next phase of tobacco production and gladly sold their tobacco without warehouse fees. Interviews conducted with growers and agricultural professionals as late as 2002 for the Kentucky Oral History Commission, include strong statements of support for the continuation of the program. Rod Keugel, a tobacco grower and a former president and longtime board member of the Burley Co-op, said in an interview in 2001,

The effort to destroy the tobacco program, is just unbelievable to me, I cannot believe that farmers, are willing for ten cents a pound, to contract *knowing* surely they know, that uh, there's an ulterior motive to what the companies are doing and, and some of the younger ones out here, I guess uh, I would include myself in

the younger generation of farmers since our average age is about 60, uh, think that “because I raise good tobacco that the company’ll be good to me and take care of me.” And uh, uh maybe- I hope they’re right, but I don’t think they are. It’s never been true before.

The controversy and uncertainty that came with contracting, combined with the dramatic quota cuts, served to increase feelings of inevitability surrounding the demise of the tobacco program. The end of the program came in October of 2004.

### **The Tobacco Buyout**

For over sixty years, the pool stocks maintained by the Burley Co-op ensured that burley tobacco farmers had a market for their tobacco, and the guaranteed minimum price ensured, with a few exceptions, that the price did not drop significantly from one year to the next. However, support prices also ensured that American tobacco was increasingly more expensive than tobacco grown in other parts of the world, such as parts of Africa, South America, and Asia. Between 1970 and 2000, tobacco imported into the U.S. for domestic manufacture grew to 46% (Duncan “From the Golden Egg to Humpty Dumpty”). While American burley growers were being paid about two dollars a pound, foreign producers were raising it for fifty to seventy-five cents a pound, “maybe up to \$1.00/lb in some years depending on the country as well as the year” (Snell email communication).

The program also never fully controlled the problem of overproduction—particularly as a result of bad crop years—so when the pool stocks grew excessively large deals were struck in which tobacco manufacturers bought out the pool stocks in exchange for lowered prices and quotas for farmers. While the companies bought out pool stocks

grudgingly each time, they were again getting the better end of the deal since they were paying far less than they would have for this tobacco had they bought it at auction. The largest of such buyouts took place in 1985; farmers accepted a thirty cent cut in poundage prices in exchange for an agreement in which the companies bought the pool stocks over a period of several years. These pool stock buyouts did not affect the existence of the tobacco program.

As noted above, there were attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to end the tobacco program; by the late 1990s, the congressional delegations of Kentucky and other tobacco-producing states were proposing their own legislative solutions to the problems plaguing tobacco farmers and the tobacco industry. By this time, it was clear to all involved that major changes to the system were needed, although there was little agreement on what those changes should be, and Congress was working to please the opposing constituencies of growers, quota owners, manufacturers, and public health advocates. Many proposals were made, some of which became legislation, some of which did not. They are too numerous to describe here; in 2002 alone, there were nine tobacco buyout bills introduced in Congress. The hope on the part of most tobacco growers was for a buyout of non-producing quota owners and a redistribution of quota that would get quota into the hands of growers, leaving the program in tact. They also favored one that did not give the FDA the authority to regulate tobacco—a possibility that remained on the table throughout the buyout negotiations.

In October 2004, Congress passed buyout legislation that ended the federal tobacco program, but did not include FDA control. The reasoning behind the buyout was that by getting rid of the support price, the market would readjust, and manufacturers

would buy more American-grown tobacco. It was also argued that the complicated system of non-producing quota owners and the growers they leased their allotments to would be simplified, and growers could accept lower prices since they would not have to lease in poundage.

The end of the program is referred to as “the buyout” because quota owners and tobacco growers are entitled to annual payments, totaling 9.6 billion dollars, for ten years through the Tobacco Transition Payment Program funded by the major cigarette manufacturers, not tax dollars; payments are based on the amount of tobacco grown and/or quota owned under the tobacco program. The purpose of buyout payments was to compensate growers and quota owners for an anticipated loss of income as well as the probable decrease in land values once there was no tobacco quota attached to their farms. Presumably, owners would lose income as they lost the ability to lease quota, while growers (whether owners or leasers of quota) would lose income because the poundage price would drop once the support price was gone. Quota owners received payments totaling seven dollars per pound of quota, and those who had leased other people’s tobacco quota received three dollars for each pound they had grown; those who owned quota and raised it themselves received the total of both payments. Many growers were in all of these categories—owning and raising some of their quota, while also leasing in quota in order to supplement what they owned. In addition to its compensatory purpose, as the name of the program indicates, buyout payments are intended to help tobacco producers make a “transition”; as I will discuss, the term “transition” has come to have multiple meanings.

Although called a “buyout,” the tobacco buyout is not a true buyout like other commodity buyouts in American agricultural history because tobacco growers are not forfeiting their right to raise tobacco; in fact they can now raise as much as they want to or at least as much as they can sell.<sup>36</sup> Farmers now work in a free-market environment, with no poundage limits but also no support price. The poundage price dropped from about two dollars a pound to around a dollar and a half the first year after the buyout. For those who were paying seventy to ninety cents a pound to raise tobacco for two dollars a pound, a dollar fifty a pound was clearly a better deal even if they continued to lease land because without the quota on the land it became considerably cheaper to lease. At the same time, however, many point out that there were also many growers that owned quota—including many who had bought quota in recent years, once the law changed to allow them to do so in 1991—and these owner-growers lost out (although for ten years their buyout payment serves as at least partial compensation for their losses).

The year after the buyout, crop-year 2005, Kentucky tobacco production reached a record low (USDA, Kentucky Agricultural Statistics 2005-2006). Although there are no statistics available regarding the post-buyout population of tobacco producers, based on my fieldwork, and as I will discuss in later chapters, those who “got out” of tobacco can be categorized by their circumstances. The first were farmers who were ready to retire, many of whom held on for several years only because of a belief in a coming buyout which they would qualify for only if their base remained active. Burley Co-op president Roger Quarles describes this first group in this way:

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<sup>36</sup> The state of Maryland passed an actual tobacco buyout in 2000. Those who voluntarily agreed to be bought out forfeited their right to ever raise tobacco again or even to help others raise it.

There had been an anticipation of this buyout for several years. [...]. There was a lot of folks that were hanging on [...] they was still growing tobacco because it was sorta known that, you had to be involved in the system in order to qualify for a payment if it were to occur, and so we had a good deal of people that would normally have retired, that were still raising a crop of tobacco. And so once the buyout occurred all those folks immediately stopped. (Quarles 1/31/08)

A second group was owners of quota who were leasing their tobacco to growers and were therefore only connected to the crop on paper. In addition, many “part-time farmers”—as full-time tobacco farmers call those who work off-farm jobs and grow a crop of tobacco—got out. Some farmers ceased tobacco production and increased farm activities they were already involved in, particularly beef cattle. In addition, there are some farmers who have successfully moved to niche crops and agribusiness opportunities but, as I will discuss, they are in the minority despite public discourses that seem to accept them as the norm. As I will also discuss more fully in future chapters, those who continue to raise tobacco are largely “tobacco men,” as well as a few women, with a particular relationship to the crop and heavy financial investments in its production.

According to Roger Quarles:

You know in my situation you know you sit back and look “Well what am I gonna do with these acres? If I don’t grow tobacco what can I do with it?” And I’ve also got these barns that I’ve, still paying mortgages on, that still have to be maintained, still have to carry insurance, still have to, paint ‘em and all that. What am I gonna do with them? Do I just let ‘em sit idle? (Quarles 1/31/08)

Although three burley warehouses remained in operation in Kentucky in the winter of 2008, still conducting small-scale auctions, almost all burley producers now sign a contract with a tobacco company—larger growers may sign contracts with multiple companies—for a specified number of pounds in particular grades at a price schedule

determined by the tobacco company prior to the beginning of the growing season. Until 2009, contracts included various incentive programs, such as eight to ten cents more per pound if a grower produced the poundage he or she contracted to raise. Philip Morris now controls an estimated 70% or more of burley tobacco contracts (Wallace).

I began this project in 2005, the first crop year following the buyout. At that point, those with whom I spoke were assuming a “wait and see” attitude; I was told repeatedly that “we’ll see what happens.” On the surface, they meant that no one knew for sure what price tobacco would bring—in itself a major change, since for over sixty years prior (the lifetimes of the majority of growers) growers could expect the support price to be announced before the opening of the market. While there was some uncertainty about whether it would climb above the price they’d gotten the year before, and how far, they could have confidence that it wouldn’t drop substantially. But, what they also meant by “we’ll see what happens” is that now they had to face the possibility that the price might drop considerably, and even more frightening, the possibility that, without the pool as their safety net, they might not be able to sell their crop at all. The price schedules that growers agree to are fully dependent on company pronouncements about the grade and quality of the tobacco presented to them at the time of sale (as judged by company representatives), and therefore leave plenty of room for the contracting company to name the price and even refuse to buy all or part of a grower’s crop of tobacco by simply grading it outside of the grades included in the contract. The contracts in fact bind neither party to buy or sell. For the first time in three generations, they had no guaranteed market. Many quit that first year, while others raised more, and still others raised less. Some quit and have since come back, and some have since quit. In 2009, I

am still being told that the new environment for American tobacco production has not shaken out yet—this is still a period of transition.

Prior to the opening of the market for the 2007 crop, Marlon Waits explained the post-buyout era this way:

Marlon: As long as it was, pretty decent quality crop you had a support price. If the companies didn't want it you still, you was guaranteed so much. Now you have no guarantee. Either they want it or they don't want it.

Ann: So does it feel...?

Marlon: Yeah it's a little nervy taking it in there and you don't know whether they're gonna buy it or not. So far they've been pretty good about it- of course, we haven't had what you call a "bad crop" yet.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the uncertainty, tobacco growers generally welcomed the buyout, for a number of reasons, but it has become increasingly clear to me that everyone involved on the production side (meaning everyone but the companies and perhaps some specific politicians) "welcomed" it primarily because, by 2004, a buyout seemed like the only way to continue to raise tobacco with any profit at all. The quota reductions in the years leading up to the buyout were so severe that one farmer described his experience this way:

They knew what they was doing, they cut us, they keep cuttin' us for three years, down- I think from 50,000 [pounds] they cut me to 10,000. Then they said "well now this year we're gonna buy out." So I got 60 or 70 thousand [dollars], and if they'da had it when they shoulda- started talking about it, I'da had 400,000 [dollars]. Now that's a big- that's a big big difference. (Sharp)

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<sup>37</sup> His statement about not yet having a "bad crop" was a reference to the upcoming marketing season, in which farmers feared they would be delivering a "bad crop" for the first time since the buyout.



Many growers, like this one, feel that the timing of the quota cuts in the years just prior to the buyout was intentionally planned to benefit the companies—particularly since a buyout was discussed throughout this period in which quota was being cut at record levels. Despite governmental oversight, the companies determined the demand and therefore had the ability to not only keep the farmers guessing in terms of what would happen with quotas from year to year, but they also had the ability to manipulate the quotas just as Phil Sharp described. I would argue that farmers generally welcomed the buyout because of the fear they felt, induced by the roller-coaster ride they experienced in the 90s, ending with drastically reduced quotas; the alternative seemed to be a program that would continue to shrink each year until marketing quotas were gone altogether. Although many growers continue to express uncertainty about the future, most tell me that things would be much worse if the buyout had not happened, although some have expressed to me that they'd prefer to have the program back in place.

In the meantime, things have changed drastically for Kentucky burley. Although Kentucky produced 75% of U.S. burley in 2007, this was just over 15% of the world's burley, down from 40% in 1990 (Snell "Burley and Dark Tobaccos"). The number of farms on which tobacco is grown has fallen significantly; there were nearly 60,000 Kentucky farms on which tobacco was grown in 1992, nearly 30,000 in 2002 (Snell "Burley and Dark Tobaccos"), and just over 8100 in 2007 (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture: Kentucky 27). It is important to note, however, that the drop from 30,000 to 8100 farms is in part a drop on paper only because it includes the loss of non-producing quota owners. What would have been counted, for instance, as five separate farms with tobacco raised by a single grower, may now be a single farm with the same amount of

tobacco. Despite discourses of decreased demand, tobacco production had sunk below demand by 2007 (Snell “Burley and Dark Tobaccos”), a fact that supports the opinions of many growers that there will continue to be a market for Kentucky burley. Some have predicted a sharp rise in the demand for U.S. tobacco, due to political conflicts in countries in which tobacco is grown as well as the shrinking value of the U.S. dollar. However, as I write in 2009 the dollar is gaining value due to the recession, and Will Snell, an agricultural economist who had been predicating a growing demand, now suggests that “we have quickly moved from a period of excess demand for U.S. burley to a more balanced supply/demand scenario or possibly an oversupply situation” (Snell “Comments”).

The government’s role in tobacco production has changed sharply since the buyout. Not only does the USDA no longer regulate the grading and marketing of tobacco, they no longer even collect data about the crop and those who grow it. Will Snell told the U.S. House of Representative’s Subcommittee on Rural Development, Biotechnology, Specialty Crops, and Foreign Agriculture in March 2009:

I find it disturbing that USDA collects data and provides analysis on hundreds of commodities ranging from lentils to chickpeas, but the data and analysis for tobacco—the ninth highest valued field crop in the U.S. has almost been totally eliminated by USDA. The Economic Research Service (ERS) of USDA decided not to replace their tobacco analyst. USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) no longer tracks tobacco trade and foreign production and USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) eliminated recording tobacco prices and providing market news. (Snell “Testimony”)

Franklin County farmer Martin Henson told me the first day that I met him that his father had always said that tobacco would soon be gone, and yet “here we are.” In an interview I later conducted with Martin I asked if he thought there would continue to be

tobacco grown in Kentucky, and he told me what I have heard many times over, “I think so, uh, there’s always gonna be smokers. They’re gonna have to get their tobacco some place” (M. Henson 4/27/07).

## CHAPTER 2: Burley Tobacco: Crop Year 2007

It's a late winter day in March 2007, and when Keenan Bishop, county extension agent, and I get out of my pickup truck at a Franklin County, Kentucky, farm, we are immediately encircled by two curious but friendly dogs, including a tiny dog who I will come to know as Buster. We walk through a gate to where two men are working, and I meet Martin Henson for the first time, along with an older fellow helping him with the day's work. As we talk, Martin continues to work and, following Keenan's lead, I begin to help a little. What I didn't know at the time, is that the pattern of interaction with Martin, a pattern I would follow over the next year, was being set.<sup>38</sup>

In this chapter, I will illustrate the tobacco year, describing the steps in the process of raising and selling a crop of tobacco, based on my fieldwork. My fieldwork began in 2005, but I spent the most time in the field, in the dual sense of the word, as I followed the 2007 crop. Between the spring of 2005 and the spring of 2008, I conducted

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<sup>38</sup> I am aware that I am depending here on what Mary Louise Pratt has called a narrative of "arrival at the field site" or the "arrival trope," a specific narrative convention in classical ethnographic writing in which it has been allowable for the ethnographer to share personal experiences in a first-person voice. According to Pratt, this space serves important rhetorical purposes for the ethnographer, "setting up the initial positionings of the ethnographic text: the ethnographer, the native, and the reader" (32); this applies to my use of this convention, as I am conscious of this as one of the goals of this chapter. Pratt describes attempts by ethnographers to render themselves invisible in the ethnographic texts they create, with the exception of such narrative conventions as this one, and here is where I hope to differ in some ways from ethnographic conventions as critiqued by Pratt, as I have remained "visible" throughout this dissertation.

I wish to thank Martin Henson, Keenan Bishop, and Dr. George Duncan for taking the time to read this chapter. George Duncan provided valuable feedback toward the improvement of several of my descriptions of tobacco technologies and terms. As the saying goes however, any remaining inaccuracies are my own.

interviews with over sixty farmers (male and female), farmers' wives,<sup>39</sup> retired farmers, county agricultural agents, university tobacco specialists, former and current warehousemen, and agricultural organization leaders.<sup>40</sup> In addition to recorded interviews, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with many of those I interviewed and with others. I was treated to numerous farm tours, which usually included inspection of the tobacco in whatever stage it was in at the time, and often a comparative inspection of tobacco being raised on different farms by the same farmer; tobacco barns and stripping rooms; greenhouses, float beds, or plant beds; and sometimes equipment sheds. Such tours rarely included areas of the farm not directly relevant to tobacco, such as areas where cattle grazed or were fed and housed or where corn or other row crops grew. I was invited to visit and observe—and at times participate—at crucial steps in tobacco production and marketing, attended events organized by farm organizations, and generally welcomed into the farms, homes, and offices of so many generous people. I was frequently fed dinner at midday and sometimes supper in the evening; the location was dependent on the role of women in the family as well as the intimacy of the relationship, with meals either in farm kitchens or at nearby convenient stores or restaurants.

Martin Henson never gave me a farm tour. Instead, he served as my guide through the tobacco year—even as I worked with many others in the tobacco community—and so I saw his float beds as he prepared them and his stripping room

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<sup>39</sup> Female farmers, farmers' wives, and farmwives are distinct categories that I will describe in more detail in Chapter 6. Here, I use "farmers' wives" to refer to women with off-farm jobs who self-described as not involved in farm tasks.

<sup>40</sup> In this dissertation when I use terms such as "members of tobacco communities" I refer to these categories of people, many of whom cross categories; a category I exclude are those that work for the tobacco companies, whom I did not interview but I did meet.

when it was time to strip tobacco and so on.<sup>41</sup> I also visited areas such as those where he fed his cattle, if I happened to be there when it was time to feed the cattle. Martin welcomed me into the daily routine of the farm in a manner that allowed me to learn the details of raising a crop of tobacco as I needed to learn them, but also to experience the rhythm of work on a tobacco farm, which most often also includes at the very least activities related to cattle, corn, and hay.

As I argued in the Introduction, the narrative of tobacco farming revolves around tradition and change, and as I began to write this chapter, I realized that my description of the tobacco year as I experienced it through fieldwork also must as well. During interviews, casual conversations, and situations such as farm tours, I was told not just about how things are done but about how they used to be done and about the changes that are currently taking place, and so I describe many of these changes here. It was also immediately apparent, when I set out to write this chapter, that just as Martin played a central role as my guide and teacher through the 2007 crop year, so too must he serve a central role in this chapter.

### **Sowing the Seeds**

The work on that first day at Martin's was the preparation of the beds in which his tobacco plants would germinate and grow until the time came to transplant them into the field. As we talked, he stretched thick black plastic across wooden frames built directly on the ground and weighted it down; he filled the plastic-lined frames with water. Later,

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<sup>41</sup> See Lee Haring's discussion of the importance of the context in the performance of folklore in which he argues, "the items the interviewer receives and decodes are selected by the performer on the basis of their appropriateness to that audience at that moment" (387). Although Haring was specifically discussing storytelling events, his argument is certainly applicable to Martin's (and other farmers') choices of both stories and other tobacco knowledge shared with me, as they deemed it appropriate.

he would plant seeds in polystyrene trays filled with peat moss based soil and the trays—each about 13 by 26 inches, with about 250 cells<sup>42</sup>—would then be set in the water to float in these *float beds*; fertilizer would be added to the water and the beds covered at night and uncovered during the warm days of spring.

Many tobacco farmers have built greenhouses in which to start their plants. Greenhouse float beds produce more usable plants; according to results of University of Kentucky trials, about 95% versus 80-85% in outside float beds (Pearce recorded interview). Martin estimated that he sees about 85% success.<sup>43</sup> However, greenhouses are more expensive to build and maintain than outside float beds, and they introduce additional risks. Greenhouses provide opportunities for controlling the environment in which the plants grow, particularly the temperature, but heating and cooling systems must be carefully monitored in order to avoid temperature extremes, and greenhouses can also harbor diseases that can spread quickly through an entire greenhouse and possibly wipe out all the plants in it (and growers told me about first-hand experiences of such disasters). For all of these reasons, some growers have chosen not to grow their own plants and instead buy them from other producers. In one sense, this can be seen as a promising entrepreneurial opportunity for farmers as they adjust to the decline of tobacco markets, and many look for additional or new sources of income. On the other hand, the buying and selling of tobacco plants has been described to me as a practice that not only represents changes that have taken place in tobacco production, but this practice also

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<sup>42</sup> Seed trays can be purchased to hold varying numbers of plants (ranging from 200 to 392), dependent on the thickness of the polystyrene and the size of the cell.

<sup>43</sup> Martin's experience with outside float beds suggests a number of reasons for fewer usable plants, ranging from holes in the covers allowing rain water to drip through and wash out cells, to instances in which young calves walked through the beds and disturbed the trays.

represents the loss of community symbolized by reciprocal or “swapping” relationships between farmers.

Before float beds came into use in the 1990s, all growers started their tobacco plants directly in the ground in one-hundred foot by twelve foot plant beds. The preparation of the plant beds was a major task that evolved over the years but retained the same basic parameters: ground was cleared, weeds were killed, seeds were planted and covered, the beds were weeded, and the plants were individually pulled and set in the field. Since at least colonial times,<sup>44</sup> through the 1950s and 60s, tobacco beds were “burned,” which meant that burning wood or brush in some form was used to kill the weeds; early on, burning logs were slowly rolled across the beds, and later, fires were built on metal frames that were then dragged across the beds, resting for a period on every part of the bed. Burning the beds was as an event that took place either in the late fall or in the early spring depending on the practices of a particular farmer, and is often remembered with fondness as a family gathering that included staying up late to monitor and move the fires, perhaps roasting hotdogs and marshmallows on the fires. In the 1960s, it became common practice to *gas* the beds—the prepared plants beds were covered with plastic and *gassed* with a range of chemicals, the most popular and lasting of which was methyl bromide, which was sold in pressurized cans. The beds were then covered to protect the seeds as they germinated; they were fertilized and irrigated as they grew. Whether burned or gassed, some weeds would survive, and the task of weeding the plant beds without stepping on or otherwise harming the young tobacco plants was a dreaded job.

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<sup>44</sup> Tatham and other eighteenth century observers describe this practice.



When it came time to *set* tobacco—as transplanting the young plants into the field is called, discussed below—individual plants were pulled from these plant beds and brought to the field, either in baskets or wooden crates or wrapped in burlap bundles. There are two major advantages of float beds over plants beds, the first being that there is no more need to *pull plants*—a job described to me, particularly by women, as one of the worst aspects of tobacco work. Women often did this job as men prepared the ground for setting or started setting—one woman commented to me that it seemed like whenever there were plants to be pulled the men suddenly had ground that needed to be worked—but many people told me it was a job that “everyone” did.

Pulling plants meant being bent over for long periods of time, trying to get through the bed without stepping on plants, which often meant perching precariously on a wooden board that was balanced across the bed. During a 2005 interview, Kathleen Bond described it vividly:

It’s hot and you’re like, either standing on your head or squatting down and you know neither one is comfortable and you have to, you can’t like really walk out into the bed because you, you know step on plants and ruin ‘em and you have to- I don’t know it just, it makes you sore and the sweat’s running in your eyes and, deer flies get on your back and bite you...

The transition to float beds was therefore quite welcome. Martin told me this about his transition:

When I first started out, I was gonna try it, so I put out about uh, about 100 trays. And at that time my wife who’s a nurse now [*slight laugh*] she was, that was before she, she was going to school. And uh, this is back in the nineties, early nineties, but anyway. I had plant beds and then I had, these hundred trays, on water. Well we pulled the plants, and then, when we got them done, we went to the water beds and, used them. She said “I’ll never pull another plant” [*laugh*] So I had to [*laughing*] make my water beds bigger, ‘cause I sure couldn’t pull ‘em. (4/27/07)

The next year Martin planted only float beds. I've heard similar stories from many farmers. But, even as I write about this in the past tense—because plant beds are talked about almost entirely in the past tense, as a practice of the distant past—I worked with a family (and heard about others) that continues to raise half of their plants in plant beds and half in water beds, arguing that plant beds result in higher yields and that raising them in beds “just seems to make a better plant” (M. Waits).

The second advantage to float beds is that fewer plants are wasted, and a great deal of time is saved. When plants had to be pulled from plant beds, the morning was usually spent pulling plants, and the afternoon was spent setting them in the field. Each day, guesses had to be made about how many plants could be transplanted into the field that afternoon; few would survive for tomorrow if too many were pulled or if a storm came up. With the float bed method, the trays full of plants are simply pulled out of the water and loaded onto a wagon or truck still in the tray; any leftovers can be slipped back into the water.

Although seed is costly, it is common practice to sow more than a grower will need in preparation for the possible loss of plants due to disease or harsh weather conditions such as drought, frost, or hail. This was particularly true when plant beds were the norm, since plants were also lost if they were pulled and not used. If setting went well, there would be plants left over after the crop had been successfully set in the field, which meant that if a neighbor ran into problems and needed more plants, surplus plants could be given to the farmer in need—literally a life-saving act when tobacco was the only source of cash for a farm family. Farmer and Burley Co-op President Roger Quarles—who raises extra plants and sells them—described it this way:

But no customarily everybody put out their own tobacco beds and then if they uh, if for some reason theirs didn't do well or had bad luck or something it was uh, typically you'd go across to your neighbor maybe he had some extra or something and they just uh, never was any charge. Nobody very seldom charged anybody- Occasionally you'd hear something like that and, somebody charging for plants and. And if they did they'd be talked about. [*slight laugh*] But uh, but then it became apparent that people didn't mind paying for 'em so it was a very quick shift. (5/20/08)

Robert Pearce, Extension Tobacco Specialist in Plant and Soil Sciences at the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, told me:

It's kinda interesting- and this is just I guess sort of a social aside, is that before, when you had plants in beds, you'd go and you'd pull your plants and when you got done, you'd have extras- We seeded a, a lot more plants than we ever used. In those days. And so, you know when you got done and neighbor called up and said "I need some plants," yeah, you know they'd just come over and pull 'em. You know we didn't really, think about plants, having a a value. Of themselves. And now the culture is that with these, with the greenhouse plants, you know, they have a very real value and can be bought and sold and traded.

As Pearce, Quarles, and others have told me, float beds have dramatically changed the value of young tobacco plants, making them a commodity to be bought and sold; that farmer in need may now have to buy those plants from neighbors or from growers that can be located through the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture website. This change is seen by some as symbolic of the sharing relationships between farmers that are now largely lost (although swapping relationships, too, are not entirely gone). Although this change may also signify a larger shift in communities more generally, it is seen by some tobacco farming families as a negative consequence of the move from plant beds to float beds even as they are thankful for the benefits of float beds.

Martin raises all his plants in the beds he was preparing that first day, enough to plant the approximately fifteen acres of tobacco that he raises (just over 30,000 pounds of cured leaf), spread over three farms. When I say we that Keenan and I “helped” on that first day, I mean small tasks like picking up a couple of pieces of wood from the back of Martin’s truck to weight down the edge of the float bed liner and helping to stretch out the liner while he filled the beds with water. I later realized that what I *didn’t* do was important; I didn’t just stand and watch, distracting him from his work, expecting him to stop working while he talked to me. Instead, Keenan and I slipped into the rhythm of Martin’s work, assisting in a minor way without being asked or asking. In two different contexts, Martin told me a story about his and his wife, Kathy’s, first date, which they spent horseback riding on the farm. This version was recorded in a story-telling session that developed when Martin came back to the house as I was finishing an interview with Kathy:

She come out one evening, Sunday evening I believe it was or something, but anyway I loaded up some saddles and we went back there and the horses are back in the back. We got to this gate down here and, I pulled up there and, she sat there and, I got out, opened the gate, got back in the truck, pulled it up, got out closed the gate, got back in the truck. I said, “Now girl, if you’re gonna spend any time around here, whosever driving don’t have to open and close the gate.” (K. Henson)

At this point Kathy, who was not raised on a farm (and who, after several years of working the farm with Martin once they were married, went back to school and became a nurse), said, laughing hard, “I just sat there. I didn’t know I was supposed to open the gate!” This brief narrative exemplifies Martin’s expectations that anyone spending time with him on the farm needs to be able to anticipate basic tasks that need doing.

During my many visits to Martin's farm, I didn't do much serious work, but I assisted in small ways when I could, and he taught me to do some of the tobacco work, including setting, topping, and stripping. Martin let me just hang out with him as he worked, which often meant anticipating some small task—like opening a gate or hitching a trailer to his truck—that needed doing. Usually, not being a farm girl, these were things I had never done and I did my best at the task, hoping most of all to avoid embarrassment. Occasionally, however, I would have to ask him how to do something, and there went the rhythm of work and talk as Martin had to show me how to do whatever it was, always something that was second nature to him. In January of 2008, as we pulled up to the barn in his pickup, just having gone through the main gate leading onto the farm, he again told me the story about Kathy and the gate—but he prefaced it with “I'll tell you like I told Kathy...” Not understanding why he was telling me this story again, and why he was prefacing it in this way, I protested, “But I opened the gate!” and then immediately I realized that for some reason, on this occasion, I had asked as we pulled up to the gate “Do you want me to open the gate?” instead of routinely opening it.

At other times, the rhythm of work and talk with Martin meant standing on the back of the tractor or the highboy as he drove back and forth through the rows, pulling the *setter*, spraying *sucker control*, or dropping tobacco sticks. It sometimes meant riding along with him in his truck while he fed cattle, often with Buster asleep in my lap. On a couple of occasions, it meant helping his friend Elic, a farmer with whom Martin has a close reciprocal work relationship. And it meant topping and stripping tobacco beside him and his crew.

As he set up his float beds that first day, Martin, sixty-six years old at the time, described his situation as a tenant farmer on the farm where we were that day. He has rented this farm, about 275 acres, for over thirty years for part of his tobacco crop and his cattle, hay, and corn. There are only about thirty tillable acres on this farm—typical of the hilly farm land of central Kentucky, explaining why tobacco and cattle have long been an important complementary pairing in this region. As Lincoln County extension agent Dan Grigson explained in an interview, “Of course, Kentucky is more suited to forage and livestock than anything else. You have the rolling land, it’s not suited for row crops, uh, you’re not gonna grow many corn and soybeans on a lot of the land that we have, especially in Central Kentucky and on East Kentucky.” Henry County tobacco farmer Mark Roberts told me, “We don’t have those big, huge thousand acres that we can go out here and rent and put in corn and go over it in a few days and be through.” Historically, this labor-intensive crop was raised in very small acreages with bases averaging less than five acres at one time, and bases of a half acre not uncommon. Even today, tobacco remains the most profitable small-acreage crop and despite increasing tobacco acreages, the average crop size was 10.8 acres in 2007 (up from the post-buyout average of 3.8 acres), and on 45% of Kentucky tobacco farms fewer than five acres were grown (Snell “Census”).

Martin’s main farm, where we were on this day, is where his barns, equipment sheds, and tobacco stripping room are located, but he also rents land for his tobacco and cattle on another farm nearby, and he purchased about eight acres of tillable land with his buyout money, where he now grows about half his tobacco crop. He and Kathy once lived in the old farmhouse on the main farm, but a few years ago they bought a small piece of the farm and built a house that we could see from where we stood. One day,

Martin and I broke for lunch after a morning of setting tobacco and joined other farmers and local men who regularly frequent the local convenient store and gas station at lunchtime. The men joked with one another, told stories on each other (particularly stories about Martin, in part perhaps for my benefit, although Martin is both well-liked and full of stories, so I imagine stories told by and about him are often center stage), and talked about their crops and livestock. At one point, Martin told us a story about the owner of the farm offering to sell it to him for about \$1.7 million; he and the other men just laughed and laughed. Martin said that the owner had told him that although it's a lot of money, he could hold onto it, and it will be worth even more. Martin told him, "yeah, *you* hold on to it and it will be worth a lot too!" The men laughed at the land owner who thought that Martin could come up with \$1.7 million (or would be willing to take on that kind of debt), and they laughed at the rapidly rising land costs of Central Kentucky, rising costs that make ownership of a farm impossible for a farmer who doesn't inherit one.

For many, "tenant farmer" connotes particular images, perhaps negative, of a time long past. Lu Ann Jones points to the tendency of scholars to "dichotomize southern farmers" into the poorest share croppers and "planter-landlords who manage other people's labor," when in fact a "mosaic of tenure arrangements characterized southern agriculture, and farmers might belong to more than one group simultaneously" (5). As a result of the federal tobacco program, tenant farming has remained a common practice in tobacco regions. Martin's situation is typical; most farmers who raise more than a very small tobacco crop piece together their total acreage over multiple farms. This is due in part to the hilly Kentucky landscape, and in part to the practice of raising tobacco on your

best land; but it is also largely due to the quota system of the former federal tobacco program, described in Chapter 1.

### **Setting the Crop**

May tenth is commonly cited as the earliest date to begin transplanting or *setting* tobacco because the chance of frost will finally be past. Others start much later; Martin told me he was raised to set tobacco Memorial Day and *house* it Labor Day.<sup>45</sup> Before setting can begin, the ground must be *worked*—plowed, disked, and otherwise prepared, dependent on the weather and the practices of a particular farmer—and in order for the ground to be worked, there must be moisture.<sup>46</sup> In May 2007, it was still too dry for Martin to set his crop. It had not rained a drop on him in May, and he'd already mowed the plants off twice and would have to do it again soon. Using various technologies, tobacco growers trim their young plants back multiple times before they are set, a practice that started out as a means of holding them from growing too large if setting were delayed by weather; early attempts involved the use of weed eaters. It has since become a management practice that is used to strengthen the stems and to produce a more uniform and generally healthier crop, as it evens out the height of the plants and ensures adequate air circulation among them.<sup>47</sup> In Martin's case, mowing off the plants means taking each tray out of the water and passing it under a lawn mower attached to a stable base and then putting it

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<sup>45</sup> Holidays often serve as markers for tobacco work, as people also talk about stripping tobacco on Thanksgiving and the ideal of having it sold by Christmas. This reflects both tobacco's status as a "13-month crop" and its symbolic connections with all aspects of life, mundane and sacred.

<sup>46</sup> There can also be too much moisture. In contrast to 2007, the 2008 and 2009 crops were late getting set because it was a very wet spring.

<sup>47</sup> This practice is one of many that demonstrate the interaction between tobacco farmers and the research of the University Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. According to Robert Pearce farmers came up with this practice in order to hold their plants for late setting, as I describe, and Extension then did research that led to the current management practice.



back in the water; this requires about four people, difficult for Martin to find this time of year, prior to the arrival of migrant workers. Those with greenhouses have systems that allow them to mow them off without removing the trays from the water—usually some sort of mowing system (often still a modified lawn mower) that is suspended over the plants and pushed across with relative ease.

The spring and summer of 2007 was a year of severe drought, a drought so severe that the closest point of comparison for farmers and extension agents alike was in the early thirties—a drought that few are old enough to remember, but most had heard stories about it or if they had not, they heard about in 2007.<sup>48</sup> The other point of comparison that Martin and others mentioned was the drought of 1983, a drought that until 2007 had been the worst in the memory of many.<sup>49</sup> As farmers began telling me around July, tobacco is a “desert crop” that needs only a small amount of rain, but at specific times—after it is set, after it is topped, and before it is cut. Martin told me that an inch a week is ideal. Clarence Gallagher of Fleming County explained it to me this way in late June 2007:

Uh, tobacco is a deep, kind of a deep-rooted thing [...] dry weather is actually good on tobacco. If you get the right rains at the right times. [...] A tobacco plant is something that will, will actually hunt for water. You know you set it out there and uh uh, I've been told this, for years, [...] You know I mean when it's dry? It's a feeding out there- it forces it, to go out and hunt you know I mean and that feeds more roots and [...] when you get that many roots out there, it's uh, that plant is gathering up everything that you put on that ground. You know when you put your fertilize on you've got more roots there, to to take in whatever you've got on the ground. And really uh uh uh, in wet weather? Um, it'll set right on top of the ground. And grow. And I mean it won't, it don't have to fight to get what it

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<sup>48</sup> Various years were given to me for this drought, but according to the Kentucky Climate Center at Western Kentucky University, the worst drought to hit Kentucky was 1930-1931. (“Fact Sheet: Historic Droughts in Kentucky”)

<sup>49</sup> At the end of the crop year, it turned out that 2007, although dryer than 1983, was not as devastating for most tobacco growers as 1983. Where farmers really felt the effects of the 2007 drought was in their cattle operations, as they faced severe shortages of hay and other grains, and many were forced to sell their cattle early when faced with the expense of feeding them through the winter.

needs. I mean it'll actually just set right on top of the ground [...] it won't won't have that deep tap root, that'll go down there and try to find. And I actually like to see dry weather when I first set uh uh uh, just for to get a good root system, and then you know let some rains come and then you know it's got the roots and everything out there, to grab whatever falls out of the sky then and you know it's, you'll have a whole lot better tobacco crop.

I was told by several farmers that a wet crop will starve you to death, and a dry crop will scare you to death. As the months went on, and we moved into the fall curing season, I began to be told that the *most* important time for moisture is the fall. Without moisture tobacco will not cure, it will simply dry up. That's what happened to a lot of the 2007 crop. But I am getting ahead of myself.

It was mid-June before Martin set his 2007 crop. When I arrived one morning, he and his crew of four workers had been at it since about 7 a.m., and when I got there they happened to be stopped, loading the setter with trays. We exchanged greetings, and once they were loaded up Martin drove off into the field on the tractor, pulling the setter and his crew. This was a fairly large field with a hill sloping down and away from where I stood, and so I watched and waited for what seemed like a very long time as they disappeared over the hill and then came back into my sight. This was only my third visit to Martin's, and since this was the setting of the crop it was the first time he was on the tractor when I arrived; as I waited, I wondered if I'd be spending the day watching the tractor come and go, and I asked myself how long I needed to stay here before I could find a way to politely excuse myself, if this was really going to be the extent of it. But, when he came back and turned the setter around to enter the next set of rows, Martin stopped and asked if I wanted to ride behind him. So, I spent the morning standing on the

hitch between the setter and the tractor, holding on to the fenders, leaned over toward him so that I could hear the stories or pieces of information that Martin volunteered and his responses to my questions. At one point, he asked if I wanted to set some plants. After I had set a few rows, and I was getting ready to resume my position behind him on the tractor, he asked me if I was left-handed or right-handed. When I replied that I was right-handed he said, with a slight gleam in his eye, something to the effect of “Well I probably should have told you to sit on the other side then. It might have been easier.”

The process of setting tobacco changed considerably through mechanization at about mid-century, but has undergone only minor changes since.<sup>50</sup> The older farmers I’ve talked to described setting tobacco by hand as children. They set it *by season*, meaning that they waited for a rain so that the ground would be soft, and then they dug each hole with a finger or a specially made peg that was whittled from a stick or broom handle or in some cases a metal peg that was purchased, and dropped the plant in and closed the soil in around it. In the 1920s, a new innovation for setting tobacco was introduced, a small metal device with a pointed end and two compartments; a large compartment held two or three gallons of water, and a smaller one held a plant. Still a hand-setting method that meant planting one plant at a time, this small setter, called a *jobber*, eliminated the need to poke the hole with a finger or peg and lessened the need to set by season because the plant could be watered as it was being set.

The first mechanical setters were also developed in the 1920s, but many farmers were unable to purchase one until as late as the 1950s. The early setters were of course pulled by horses; many of the farmers I talked with that are old enough to remember the

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<sup>50</sup> See van Willigen and Eastwood (83-101) for a discussion of the evolution of tobacco setting technologies.

move to tractors saw them introduced as late as the 1950s and 1960s. Early tobacco setters were “one row” setters, pulled first by horses and later by tractors, that required two people sitting on seats that were barely off the ground and one person to drive the team or tractor that pulled the setter. The two people on the setter took turns putting the plants in the ground as the setter opened and closed a furrow and watered the plant. Tractor-pulled two-row setters requiring two or four people setting (depending on the design) and one driving now dominate, although much larger setters are available, and one-row setters are still used by some. Both women and men ride the setter, but driving the tractor is a universally male job—so much so that I was told several stories about wives who wanted to drive the tractor and pull the setter, and when they finally did they only caused trouble.

When setting tobacco with a typical setter, each plant is placed by hand into the mechanism of the setter (depending on the design this may be metal fingers or a wire basket), and the machine does the rest—it digs a furrow, adds a water/fertilizer mix that the grower has prepared in a tank that is attached to the setter, drops in the plant, and covers the furrow. This all happens very quickly, and it requires constant movement and coordination on the part of whoever is doing the setting: pulling a plant from a tray with one hand, shifting it to the other hand, and then dropping the plant into the rapidly turning mechanism. With a finger-type setter (like the one that Martin uses), the hand that is dropping the plant must wait to be sure that the fingers grab the plant at just the right point before reaching for another plant.

Plants are occasionally “missed,” and following the setter to fill the gaps is a job described to me repeatedly as the first responsibility in the tobacco that many adults

remember being given as very small children. After the adoption of the mechanical setter, “jobbers” were often used for this task. Today’s growers rarely expend the labor needed to set missed plants by hand, now that the labor is largely paid labor instead of family labor, and now that they raise larger crops and are not limited by an allotment based on acreage.

Already late, Martin’s crop got even later when his tobacco died just after he set it. He had to re-set almost every row of every acre; the field that I’d “helped”<sup>51</sup> set was completely disked under and re-set, while in his other fields there were a few rows that survived. It was nearly July 4<sup>th</sup> before he had a healthy crop of tobacco set, and there was still no rain. This was the latest he’d ever set tobacco in his nearly sixty years of raising the crop, and it was the most he’d ever had to re-set. In February 2008, he was still talking about what he should have done differently, and I imagine he’ll be talking about it for a long time to come. He told me, “I was uneasy about it when I set, ‘cause the ground didn’t suit me”; he told me he should have irrigated more before he set so that the ground was more welcoming, and he could have worked the clumps out of the soil more thoroughly. This might have avoided the loss of that crop, a loss that amounted to over \$5000 in labor, plants, and chemicals—even with about 250 trays of plants given to him by a neighbor (despite the concerns of many, reciprocal relationships among farmers still do indeed exist).

Discussions of what he’s done with his crop, what he plans to do, what he should do, what others farming have done or plan to do—all these things are part of the daily life

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<sup>51</sup> He referred to that field on more than one occasion as the field that I “helped” set, despite the fact that I was very little help.

of the farmer, whether leaning on the pickup of another farmer who has stopped by to borrow equipment or lend a hand, or at midday, for those farmers that meet up at a local establishment for lunch. I was told repeatedly that no crop of tobacco is like the one before it or the one that will follow and that for many, the challenges that each new year brings are part of the appeal of raising tobacco.

### **Tending the Crop**

Certain parts of the process of raising a crop of tobacco symbolize tobacco work, and these practices are discussed more frequently than others. This includes setting, topping, cutting and housing, and stripping tobacco. Perhaps these tasks are referred to most frequently because they were times in which the whole family once came together in the work, and they therefore are the times about which nostalgia is most often expressed. Other tasks—side-dressing, the application of herbicides and pesticides, cultivating, and *chopping out*, for instance—are mentioned or described less often. These are the tasks that are most frequently performed by the lone farmer. The rows are side-dressed (fertilizer applied) after setting, cultivated after setting, and the weeds are *chopped out* periodically throughout the season, depending on the conditions of the season and the amount of time available to the grower.

The time from tobacco setting to when it is cut and housed spans about ninety days. After tobacco is set, cultivated, and side-dressed, there is a bit of a lull in the tobacco work during which a grower can turn attention to cattle and other farm tasks. Most tobacco farmers also raise cattle, and when I asked Martin why they go together so well, he responded:

Well, when you're, when you're, except for stripping, when you're in your tobacco, there's not a whole lot to do with the cattle. In the spring you work 'em, 'course I got cows calving in the spring, you work your cattle, you turn 'em out, you look up at 'em two or three times a week or whatever, and uh. And you're in your tobacco, you're- and cutting your hay. [...] What I like to do I like to do, cultivate tobacco, early in the morning, and then go cut hay, and then, do that and then the next day, cultivate a little tobacco and go tend the hay. And then, the next day, cultivate a little tobacco and go rake hay and bale. It's a, that a way it's kind of a one man operation. [...] But uh, cattle and tobacco work out pretty good for me. When you're slack on cattle, you're you know busy on your, cutting hay and [...] plowing, and chopping out and so forth. (4/27/07)

In good years, the cattle need very little because they graze the pastureland, but there is hay to cut and bale, corn to harvest, and silage to chop, all in preparation for the needs of the cattle in the coming winter. In drought years like 2007, things are different. In 2007, farmers were beginning to feed hay to their cattle in June because of the lack of forage for grazing, and there was very little hay to cut.

At some point, however, the tobacco has to be *chopped out*—the weeds are chopped out with a hoe. The number of times varies, and the degree has changed drastically over the years due to the introduction of herbicides as well as increased acreage. Charlie Long, now in his late 60s, described chopping out when he was young:

They were particular about it from the time it went in the ground 'til the time it went on the tobacco floor. Used to they raised uh, uh tobacco, they called it "choppin' it out." You went through with a hoe, and you [...] cut all the weeds out. [...] I worked for a guy one time [...] it didn't make any difference, if it wadn't a, a sprig o' grass or a weed, in 10 foot of that plant, he wanted the dirt pulled away from that plant, and new dirt pulled to it.

It is clear from Charlie's description, and from similar descriptions I heard from others, that the standards are understood to have changed, and this is a point of judgment for

some. Several times, I was given descriptions of tobacco that was full of weeds because a farmer just didn't take the time he should have to properly chop it out.

In 2007, the severe drought conditions lessened the need for chopping out, but made it necessary to irrigate, for those with the resources to do so. Irrigation means a lot of work moving irrigation equipment between fields and water sources, and it often means late nights of watching the pump. I went out to visit with Martin one evening while he irrigated a field at the back of the farm with water from a small lake nearby. He connects a pump to his tractor which then connects to a very detailed system of pipes and water guns; the pipes and guns must be moved as he irrigates the field in pieces over several days. He described the complicated process of setting up to irrigate in one of our interviews, laughing as he said, "And then, you go down and babysit the pump for, three hours or four hours, however long it takes, and that's that's worse than work" (4/27/07).

Tobacco is closely observed by the grower—and his or her neighbors—during this period of time. Clarence Gallagher and I walked out into one of his fields one day in June and discovered tobacco worms on several plants, even though he had already sprayed to prevent them. He remarked during an interview later that day, "if I'd not walked out there for two weeks they'd have eaten it all"—but of course he would never have left his tobacco that long without inspecting it. Walking out into the tobacco regularly is as important as any other part of tobacco production, as the grower vigilantly watches for signs of disease or pests. Looking at the tobacco was for many a part of family ritual, according to Keenan Bishop, who told me:

Keenan: I think it was traditional we'd go there on Sunday's for dinner, and you know if it was during the summertime, part of that ritual was you'd get in the car and drive out in the field and, look at the tobacco and, "oo" and "ah" and, it was,



my grandfather's way of showing off and, it was just kind of an expected thing, you knew if tobacco was growing you had to go look at it 'cause it was, you know it was so important, the primary part of their life.

Ann: And would he point out, that it looks good or it looks bad or that-

Keenan: Oh yeah you're always measuring, you know the height of it and how it compares to neighbors and, how it compares to last year's and, the size of the leaves and all that stuff and, and you look through the family albums and you see, you know pictures of kids birthdays and Christmases and tobacco crops.

Phyllis Bailey's self-published book, Shelby County Tobacco Farmers: A Pictorial History bears this out, as it includes not only photographs from throughout the tobacco year, but a great number of photographs of families standing in or in front of their tobacco patches. Although the majority of the other photographs in the book are snapshots of tobacco work as it was being carried out, these photographs are all clearly posed.

Before the advent of pesticides, tobacco horn worms and other pests were picked off by hand—another series of walks through the field, this time picking off these chubby green worms (thick as your thumb), squishing their heads, and dropping them into a bucket. The most destructive diseases to watch for are blue mold and black shank, which, despite resistant varieties, frequently show up (blue mold is airborne and black shank can be water borne, but once it is in a piece of land it stays there), but there are many other possible problems. So, although this time period—usually June and July—is often described as a slow period in terms of a farmer's tobacco crop, there is clearly work to be done.

The lull ends when it is time to *top* tobacco—to walk through the fields and snap out the bloom at the top of every single plant by hand. Flue-cured tobacco producers mechanized this process in the late 1960s (Daniel 263), but it is said that burley tobacco

is less suited for mechanization of all kinds, including topping. According to agricultural engineer George Duncan, burley farmers would not accept the mechanization of topping because they felt they were losing the high priced leaves; he believes, however, that the labor that would be saved might make up for the leaf-loss (11/29/07). Burley farmers feel that it takes a human hand to snap out the bloom in just the right place so that the flower is fully removed and no leaves are ripped or wasted; this is true for burley growers with five acres and those with three hundred acres. Usually taking place in July or early August, topping is an extremely hot and sticky job.

In a normal year, the tobacco would be well over the heads of those doing the topping. In 2007, the topping that I did was in tobacco that was between the height of my knees and my shoulders, much of it requiring bending rather than reaching, and it was still hot and sticky. It's a hard job: walking through and alternating between two rows, snapping out the bloom or just the right number of leaves if a bloom has not yet formed, without ripping the larger leaves around it. It's easiest when a bloom has started and when it's a tall plant. When I topped with Martin and his crew, I topped just one row at a time while they each topped two, and I still quickly fell behind.

Topping also signals that it will be three to five weeks until cutting and housing can begin, so topping is the official end to the lull. At the time of topping, the growth inhibitor maleic hydrazide or MH-30 is applied. Some growers apply MH-30 just before topping and some just after. As Martin mixed chemicals in the tank of the highboy—MH-30 and Orthene, a pest control, as well as another chemical that helps it to stick to the plant—he explained that he likes to spray right after he tops because if MH-30 is

applied before topping the tops will droop. In addition, safety concerns necessitate not walking through the tobacco for a couple of days after spraying.

MH-30, which goes by a number of vernacular names—*sucker control*, *sucker dope*, *sucker kill*, or simply *MH*—is a chemical that stops the growth of the “suckers” that sprout in the elbow-like space between the stalk and each stem, in order to encourage the growth of the valuable leaves of the tobacco plant. Before the introduction of MH beginning in the 60s, all the suckers, like the tops, had to be broken out by hand. *Suckering tobacco* once meant walking through the fields, multiple times, removing the suckers at every joint of every stalk of tobacco. It might take four or five days for one person to sucker an acre of tobacco (R. Taylor 7/30/05). It’s obvious why MH-30 is often cited as one of the most important changes in tobacco production in living memory.<sup>52</sup>

When MH-30 was introduced, it, like other chemicals, was sprayed from a tank that was worn like a backpack. Now, the suckers are controlled by spraying MH-30 with a highboy, one farmer driving through the fields spraying multiple rows at a time. The highboy—a piece of farm equipment used in many crops, with long legs that enables passage through the rows, above the crop—was also introduced to tobacco farms in the 60s, but at that time few farmers could afford to purchase one. Those who could afford to invest in a highboy—either themselves or together with other farmers—often did side work spraying tobacco for those who couldn’t. Once sprayed with MH-30, the leaves of

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<sup>52</sup> At the same time, however, MH residues have been a source of on-going research and controversy. European leaf buyers have insisted on tobacco with less MH chemical residue and the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture has defended it’s use (it has passed muster with the EPA) while also conducting research into the best ways to lower residues for the sake of the market. They now recommend a combination of MH and other chemicals as well as new spraying techniques, all of which offer cost-savings to farmers as well. Some farmers question the safety of MH (in terms of their own health and the health of tobacco users) at the same time that they depend on it for the labor-savings it provides them.

the tobacco plant continue to grow, adding weight to the plant; they then begin to turn yellow, signaling that it is ready to be cut.

### **Cutting and Housing**

In preparation for cutting, *tobacco sticks*—wooden sticks, about four and a half feet long and three-quarter by one inch in diameter, hand-split or manufactured, that will hold the cut tobacco—are dropped in the field. They are loaded onto a platform on the back of a highboy where at least two people stand or sit (depending on the set-up of the highboy), dropping them into the rows one at a time, as the highboy is driven through the field. To ensure the efficiency of cutting, the sticks must be dropped at even intervals. According to Roger Perkins, a Franklin County grower, the sticks should be dropped so that they lie in the rows end to end, a few inches apart; the dropping of extra sticks means wasted labor because once a field of tobacco is cut, the leftover sticks must be picked up, and labor has been wasted both dropping them and picking them up.

One day in September, I stood behind Martin while he drove the highboy, and two men dropped sticks from the back of the highboy into the field. I asked him about the days before highboys, when sticks were carried into the field, one shoulder load at a time. In response, as he often does, he told me a story. One year, he started dropping sticks and had only dropped about two or three rows when a guy came along wanting to cut tobacco for him (at cutting time, growers commonly have to accept labor when offered in case they don't get more offers). He told him to go ahead, and the guy started cutting in the rows where Martin had dropped sticks. Then two more guys came along wanting to cut;

Martin said to go ahead, and they started cutting. He had started dropping sticks at around one o'clock in the afternoon, and he continued to drop them, enough to keep up with all three cutters, until dark. When they finally quit, he just lay down on the ground and said something to the effect of, "tell my wife I'll be home as soon as I get the energy to get back up." He ended by repeating, "Not a one of them ran out of sticks." He told me they had cut two and a half acres which means he carried about 3200 sticks into the fields on his back at top speed, and "Not a one of them asked for a stick."

Although mechanical harvesters have been designed and tested since the late 1950s, with the exception of a handful of large farmers testing these machines burley tobacco continues to be cut entirely by hand. Flue-cured growers mechanized their cutting practices in the late 1970s, a decade after they adopted mechanical topping technologies as well as bulk curing and loose-leaf marketing, cutting their labor costs from 370 to 58 man-hours per acre (Daniel 264). Most burley farmers told me they'd like to see cutting mechanized, but all of the attempts so far have resulted in too many damaged and wasted leaves. There is a mechanical cutter that many feel is proving to do a decent job, the GCH Gold Standard Harvesting System, but this cutter is far out of the economic reach of tobacco farmers, with an initial investment of one to three million dollars to cover the costs of the machine and the curing structures required for a potential 100 to 200 acre crop of tobacco. These frame structures hold only 448 plants, and therefore fifteen to seventeen are needed per acre at around \$1000 each. On the other hand, Mark Roberts, a Henry County farmer that tested the GCH for the second season in 2007, told me that "If it was affordable it'd be worth it. There's no question." It costs him about \$400 per acre

to pay a crew to cut, and the machine requires just him to drive the harvester and another guy to move the frames around.

Cutting usually takes place in August, and it is hot, back-breaking work. Each cutter goes into the field with a *tobacco knife* or *tomahawk* (as it is more commonly called) and a *spear*. The tomahawk is an ax-like tool, with an eighteen inch wooden handle and a four inch metal blade, and the spear is a metal cone, about six and a half inches long, with an extremely sharp point. The cutter picks up a tobacco stick, thrusts it into the ground at an angle, puts his spear on the upward end, grabs a plant with one hand, and cuts it off at ground level with the other, and, with the tomahawk still in one hand, grabs hold of the stalk with both hands and spears it about one-third of the way up the stalk, onto the tobacco stick. He does this six times per stick—standing between two rows, he alternates cutting a plant from each of the two rows, cutting what is called a *stick row*. Six stalks per stick has become the accepted norm since wage labor has come to dominate because the workers are paid by the stick, necessitating a consistent number. Prior to this, the number of stalks per stick was often six, but might vary with the size and weight of the tobacco.

A very good cutter cuts 1200 to 1500 hundred sticks, with six stalks per stick, in a day, which is about an acre; stories are told of men who can cut up to 2000 (or men who could in their prime). When done well, the cutter never stops, never stands upright, and never puts down his tomahawk; the sticks do not fall over, and the stalks do not split out. Good cutters are variously described as *lean*, *agile*, *fast* but *steady*, *men*. Women rarely cut tobacco, and when they do the exception is noted. Alice Baesler, who raises 300 acres of tobacco with her husband, told me that one of her cutters is a woman, and she

can cut 1000 sticks in a day, “and that’s good in anybody’s book.” Another farmer told me that when he was growing up, the ability to cut 1000 sticks made a boy a man.

Garrard County farmers Jonathon Shell (nineteen years old when I met him in March 2007) and his grandfather, G.B. Shell, described cutting to me this way:

Jonathon: You know you just don’t come out and pick up a tobacco knife and start cuttin’ tobacco. You know, tobacco is such a brittle, um, plant, you know you- you gotta get it on a certain position on the stalk, you know maybe not the exact position, but you gotta get it in the right position where that you don’t split the stalk out and it just fall right off the stick, you’ve gotta, have your stamina up enough to where you can cut a hundred and fifty, sticks in a row-

G.B.: or two hundred-

Jonathon: Or two hundred or three hundred even. [...] And the main thing is stamina and form [...]

G.B.: It’s kinda like basketball or football, the best guys, win.

Ann: Well what makes the best guy?

G.B.: Strength.

Jonathon: Stamina. (3/19/07)

Men recount memories of their younger years, racing through the rows with brothers, friends, and cousins. It is often described as a competition sport, and in fact the “world championship tobacco cutting contest” has taken place in Garrard County each harvest season since 1981.

As Jonathon Shell showed me how to cut tobacco, he told me how much he loved to cut; when he is cutting he feels like he is really working, he told me, and at the end of the day he can see what he has accomplished. He pointed to a muscle in his inner thigh and said *that* was the muscle that he felt the first day of cutting season—all night he’d

feel like his leg would not stretch out, but it got better as the days went by and his body adjusted. Fewer and fewer farmers do any cutting themselves, largely turning this most physical of jobs over to Hispanic men. Pay varies slightly, but in 2007, farmers that I spoke with were generally paying twelve cents a stick to cut and paying an hourly wage for housing it in the barn, or they were paying thirty-five to forty cents a stick to cut and house.

Most growers leave the sticks of tobacco in the field until they are wilted, usually for three days.<sup>53</sup> At this point, they are somewhat lighter (when green, according to Martin, tobacco weighs sixty to eighty pounds per stick) and less vulnerable to leaf loss and therefore easier to house.<sup>54</sup> Of course, while standing in the field for those three days tobacco is most vulnerable to weather, and I have been told many stories of hail storms and floods destroying a crop that had just been cut. At the very least, rain on cut tobacco results in *muddy tobacco*—mud-splattered or mud-caked tobacco that, once cured, creates a suffocating dust when the leaves are stripped off and may be unsellable. Franklin County farmer Roger Perkins remarked to me one morning, as we watched his crew cutting tobacco, that his grandfather would never have been cutting on this day because there was a slight chance of a thunderstorm that night. According to Roger and others, growers just do the best they can now; because tobacco is now often grown in large acreages it is impossible for many farmers to wait for the ideal weather. While it wilts in

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<sup>53</sup> This was apparently not always the case, but was a new method promoted by the University of Kentucky at some point. See van Willigen and Eastwood 125.

<sup>54</sup> According to George Duncan, who told me that farmers commonly overestimate the weight of a stick of tobacco, the maximum weight of a stick of green tobacco is about 48 pounds. (Email communication 5/22/09).



the field, it is also susceptible to being *sun burnt* if it receives too much sun, but I was told by many farmers that three morning dews will take the sunburn out of it.

After the sticks of tobacco wilt in the field, they are loaded onto wagons and driven to the barn. The *housing* begins. Housing tobacco refers to hanging the tobacco, still on sticks, in the barn where it will hang until it is cured and ready to strip. Presumably the term *housing* comes from the former term for tobacco barns, *tobacco houses* (as used in Tatham). Burley tobacco barn sizes vary, as do descriptions of barn sizes; barns might be described in terms of the number of *tiers*, *rails*, *bents*, or even *posts*—most often by *rails* or *bents*, rarely by such conventional measurements as feet or inches.<sup>55</sup> The posts and tiers section off the barn into *bents* which are usually twelve or fourteen foot sections of the barn, separated by support posts stretching from ground to roof. The horizontal beams, which stretch from post to post across the barn, support the rails where the tobacco will be hung; each layer of rails is referred to as a *tier*. Tobacco barns usually have three tiers, which are vertically spaced four to five feet apart, and may have as many as five; there is often an additional tier above the central corridor of the barn below the peaked roof. Burley tobacco barns are usually lined with vertical side vents in order to allow for the control of ventilation and moisture levels inside the barn as the tobacco cures, although occasionally a barn with horizontal vents along the top or bottom can be seen dotting the landscape. The central corridor, with doors on each end, is large enough for a tractor pulling a wagonload of tobacco to drive through. While

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<sup>55</sup> Different kinds of tobacco, because they require different curing methods, are housed in distinctly different types of barns, but all are similarly structured on the inside. Dark-fired tobacco, for instance, is cured in barns that are much smaller and very tall, so that the smoke from the smoldering fires lit below the hanging tobacco can cure the leaves. See Hart and Mather.

conventional burley barns can hold two to five acres of tobacco, the largest barns can hold ten to twelve.

When housing begins, a load of tobacco is driven into the barn; several workers climb up into the tiers, and the tobacco is handed up to them. A crew may include one worker per tier on each side of the wagon, which means that if it is a three-tier barn there may be six workers up in the barn. A smaller crew might work on one side of the barn at a time, cutting the number of workers in half. Workers usually stand on the wagon and hand sticks of tobacco either directly up to those in the tiers or to other workers on the ground, who then hand it up into the barn. When I watched tobacco being housed at the Gallagher farm in Fleming County, the crew housed about six double wagon loads in three hours. This crew of ten workers included four up on the rails of the three tier barn, and six handing the tobacco from the wagon: three per side, with two on the wagon, one on the ground at the bottom tier on each side, and one between the wagon and bottom tier on each side. This was an abnormal crew, made up all of local workers, and all white.

Hispanic workers, primarily from Mexico and primarily male, now do the vast majority of cutting and housing for most Kentucky farmers, much as they now do much of the harvest work for farmers across the country; they currently accounting for at least 75% of total labor hours (Snell and Halich). At cutting and housing time, that percentage is even higher. The 1980s was a transitional period in which more and more farming men and women were taking off-farm or *public* jobs in order to sustain their farms economically; at the same time, it was becoming more difficult to find local labor for hire that was willing and able to work seasonally and dependably on the farm. These and other factors combined to create a severe labor shortage. One response to this shortage

was a renewed push for mechanization, and the second was the recruitment of migrant laborers primarily from Mexico.<sup>56</sup> Beginning at the end of the 1980s and the early 90s, Hispanic workers became the primary labor source and came to be viewed as a saving grace for Kentucky farms.

Most Hispanic farm workers are undocumented migrant workers, although as farm sizes grow tobacco farmers are increasingly participating in the federal guest worker program known as H-2A, which regulates the legal hiring of non-citizen farm laborers. Not all Hispanic workers are migrant, as some have settled into Kentucky communities; once these workers become settled, however, they often find employment that pays more and is more consistent than farm work. Farmers often comment that they become “Americanized” and no longer want to do physical labor, although others tell me that many find jobs working construction, which pays much higher wages. It is impossible to generalize about the relationship between Kentucky farmers and the Hispanic workers upon whom they depend. Farmers frequently express their feeling that Hispanic labor saved them. They would not be farming today, many have told me, were it not for Hispanic workers. According to many farmers, Hispanic workers are willing to work hard for long hours, unlike those local workers who are available to work seasonally—workers who cannot hold fulltime, year-round jobs for a variety of reasons. The story of the move to Hispanic workers is often told with a sense of relief, as local seasonal labor is described as undependable. Many farmers that rely on Hispanic labor see a core group of the same workers return every year, and many have formed close relationships with these

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<sup>56</sup> Articles in the Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter in 1990 detail efforts to both recruit migrant labor and to help farmers hire such workers legally (April, October). One farmer quoted in the newsletter echoed what many farmers told me, “We’re not trying to find cheap labor; we’re just trying to guarantee a workforce” (April 1990:5).

employees, some even taking trips to meet their families and see their homes in Mexico. At the same time, however, there are farmers that claim that the quality of their tobacco has suffered because migrant workers do not handle it with the care that they are asked to, and on occasion I heard overtly racist remarks about the abilities of these men and women to perform as expected (such as characterizations of them as children that can't be trusted to follow directions).

In the 2006 crop year—one with particularly high yields—farmers who depended on migrant labor faced a severe labor shortage that those I have spoken to attribute to the political focus on “illegal immigration”—a misnomer since most Hispanic farm laborers do not come to the U.S. with intentions of staying, but instead travel to the U.S. to earn money during harvest season and return home for the winter, even though, as I mentioned, some do choose to stay.<sup>57</sup> The Immigration and Naturalization Service has long turned a blind eye to undocumented farm workers, but in 2006 there were multiple farm raids and stories of undocumented workers being picked up by the authorities while traveling to Kentucky farms. It is thought that fear also kept some workers from coming into the U.S. that year.

There are numerous contract arrangements between farmers and workers. Some contract directly with individuals, some contract with a crew through an agent (also usually a Hispanic man) who manages multiple crews, and some contract with and house the same crew for the entire cutting season (or longer). According to the scenario described to me by both farmers and extension agents, the politicization of immigration issues that came to a head in 2006 resulted in a shortage of workers in all but the last

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<sup>57</sup> Snell and Halich also attribute a growing shortage in migrant labor in part to “immigrant issues (e.g. border control of illegal labor, terrorism concerns)” (8).

category of contract relationships. Because there were fewer workers, crews and individuals who contracted by the job rather than the season committed themselves beyond what they were able to handle, and they would cut a farmer's tobacco and not make it back for days (well beyond the desired three) to house, increasing the chances of muddy or sun-burnt tobacco. Farmers tell stories of other farmers watching their crops rot in the field in 2006 because of a lack of workers to cut it or house it once it had been cut.

The workers that Martin contracted with in 2006 were about fifteen days later than he wanted; they came and cut a half day and then six inches of rain fell, resulting in very muddy tobacco in that particular field. He was able to save some of it, but much of it had to be discarded, including a disproportionate number of the most valuable leaves, the "tips" or upper-most leaves. Martin said that it took twice as long to strip that tobacco (therefore doubling his labor costs) and described cleaning the dusty stripping room out two or three times a day and—in his typical "glass half full" manner—he laughed as he said that he was just glad that they hadn't cut all day.

Clarence Gallagher also had a hard time in 2006; he ended up housing himself the tobacco that a contract crew had cut because they didn't make it back in what he saw as an appropriate length of time. As a result, he was determined to get together a crew of local workers in 2007, a group that would do all the cutting and housing together from start to finish so that they would be able to work at the same pace. Someone joined them one day that was not at their pace and couldn't keep up (he was "green"), but other than that this crew stayed together through the cutting and housing of Clarence's twenty-two acres. Clarence is the only grower I met who had a crew of local, all white, labor in 2007. The crew, whose roles I mentioned above, included his college-age son and a

couple of his friends (including one young woman), two women from a local Amish community who have worked with him throughout the tobacco season for a number of years, two men that he swaps work with, a couple of other local men in their 40s or 50s, and Clarence himself.

Housing would once have been done by local boys—for instance a farmer’s son(s) and other high school boys. The shortage of local help that began in the 1980s and peaked in the 1990s is commonly blamed on new employment opportunities for teens, such as fast food restaurants. I was asked repeatedly, “why would kids want to work in tobacco in the hot summer if they can flip burgers?” There are no fast food restaurants or other such job opportunities in the community where Clarence farms, and I suspect that this played an important role in Clarence’s ability to get this crew together.

Although labor was not in as short supply in 2007, there is a general feeling that the labor shortage is the greatest problem growers face. Some farmers say labor may be the final hardship that forces them out of tobacco, and it is generally commented that if there were a satisfactory and dependable solution to the current labor shortage, there would be no limit to Kentucky tobacco production (except, of course, the limits imposed by the market). Not unlike during the labor shortage of the 1980s, mechanization is once again being looked at as a possible solution, leading to the belief by some that mechanization will eventually take over, and small growers will be completely forced out.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> There is a debate over whether the tobacco companies (mainly Philip Morris) are trying to push out smaller growers so that they have fewer growers to deal with or if they recognize that they need the higher quality tobacco that small growers continue to produce over larger growers who, most agree, have traded quantity for quality.

Women rarely climb up into the barn, but they often hand up the heavy sticks of tobacco from the wagon; the most agile, and usually the youngest, men climb the highest in the barn, and there are many stories of people (including Martin) falling out of barns during housing. The sticks should be spaced about six inches apart so that air can circulate around the leaves as they hang upside down from the sticks, and, particularly if the tobacco is tall, the stalk ends should be carefully alternated with the tops of the tier below so that they do not overlap. Martin prefers that his tobacco be hung eighteen sticks to the rail, and he says that after the tobacco has hung in the barn a few days you should be able to see the underside of the roof when standing in the barn. Proper spacing prevents *house-burn*, which results in rotten stems and leaf loss; according to Martin, you can smell as it starts. Occasionally, a stalk of tobacco falls because the stalk splits out because it was not speared in the center of the stalk (a sign of bad cutting that Jonathon mentioned in the interview exchange quoted above). The grower or other supervisor usually picks these up and re-spears them onto new sticks. These are the kinds of practices that some growers tell me are getting lost, as labor has moved from family labor to paid labor that does not have an investment in assuring that the crop is the highest quality, since they will be paid the same wages no matter what the tobacco brings.<sup>59</sup>

### **Curing and Stripping**

Burley tobacco is air-cured, in contrast to heat-cured tobaccos such as dark-fired (produced primarily in Western Kentucky and Tennessee) and flue-cured (North and South Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Georgia). As I mentioned above, the weather must

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<sup>59</sup> I will discuss the perceptions of change, and expressions of nostalgia, surrounding the treatment of tobacco in more detail in Chapter 6.

cooperate in order for burley to properly cure. If the weather is dry, it will cure too quickly and will be in danger of getting “piebald,” which means it is too dry and yellowed; more time in the barn in humid weather can remove signs of piebald. If it gets too cold before it is fully cured, it will stay partially *green*, never fully curing; if it freezes, it will get *fatty stems*—stems that do not cure up and literally feel like animal fat. Green or frozen tobacco is harder to reverse than piebald, and often impossible.

Traditional burley tobacco barns are distinct because of the vertical shutters that line the sides; in the past these shutters were methodically opened and closed in order to regulate the curing and ensure that the tobacco came *in* and *out of case* or *order* daily, which is what must happen if tobacco is to cure as it should and not simply dry. When tobacco is *in case* or *in order* (*case* is used more frequently in burley country and so I will use it here) it is moist and pliable, and when it is *out of case* it is brittle and crumbles at the touch. Shutters are not always opened and closed anymore, a lost traditional practice that farmers often point out, some attributing it to laziness, others attributing it to size (large growers may have twenty or thirty or even more barns full, spread out over miles of farmland), and still others attribute it to changes in the style of tobaccos that manufacturers want. The recognition of the waning of this practice became evident during the drought year of 2007, when the Cooperative Extension Service reminded farmers of the importance of using “management techniques” to hold in what little moisture there was. A September 2007 press release included this advice:

The unrelenting heat that has held a tight grip on Kentucky gradually will submit to a series of disturbances that will move through the region during the next several days [...] The potential for significant rainfall is not as bright, but chances of showers are in the forecast for the next several days.



As a result, tobacco growers should try to open vent doors at night or during periods of high humidity, and keep them closed in dry periods during the day.

“The idea is to allow the moisture of evenings and rainy days to migrate into the curing structure and bring the tobacco into ‘case’ or ‘order’ which means leaves being in a pliable or non-shattering condition,” said Gary Palmer, UK Extension Tobacco Specialist. (“Weather and Management”)

Numerous alternative curing structures have appeared in recent years, many through Extension research, some adopted more widely than others. The uncertainty of tobacco’s future has kept many farmers from building expensive new tobacco barns, and many have instead begun to use field curing structures—scaffolds made of wood or a combination of wood and wire built at the edge of the field on which one tier of tobacco is hung, then covered with plastic.<sup>60</sup> Such structures are more economical in the short run but only last four or five years; many farmers have told me that keeping the plastic on is a problem, resulting in the curing process being interrupted as the tobacco is exposed to the weather. Others have built barns designed to be more economical, such as new models that are only partially enclosed. Although much has been made in the local and national media about “what to do with all those empty tobacco barns,”<sup>61</sup> and many barns are in fact suffering from ill repair, farmers actually face a shortage of barn space, as the barns are now not in the places where they are needed—with post-buyout shifts in the location and size of tobacco fields—and owners of barns in disuse are increasingly unwilling to rent them out either because of safety concerns or because they just don’t want people

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<sup>60</sup> Minus the plastic of course, such curing structures were used by colonial tobacco planters as well. According to Robert, “hanging the leaves on lines rather than letting them ferment in piles in the sun” began during the time of Rolfe, introduced by a colonist named Thomas Lambert (1952:9).

<sup>61</sup> For example, a 2006 story on National Public Radio was entitled “Tobacco Barns: Stately Relics of a Bygone Era” by Kentucky native Noah Adams.

coming onto their farms. In addition, farmers are reluctant to spend the money to maintain barns in the climate of ongoing uncertainty. Mark Roberts told me:

It's kinda funny, here we are- back then, that was what? Ten fifteen years ago or longer we were saying "well I don't know where tobacco's going, I'm not sure if it's gonna be here, and I'm not sure if we're gonna get paid enough we can't afford to build barns- we gotta look at something else." Well here we are right now, this many years later saying the same exact thing. "Is it gonna- is it always gonna be here, do they always wanna buy our tobacco? And are they gonna be willing to pay for it?" So that hasn't changed.

Curing usually takes place between August and November, with tobacco stripping starting between sometime in October and Thanksgiving, dependent on the weather, when the crop was set and topped, and the amount of tobacco that a farmer raises. Some large growers start stripping tobacco in September and in some cases may be able to *double crop* their barns—allow a crop to cure, take it down and strip it, and then house a later crop in the same barn. The goal has traditionally been to finish stripping by Christmas, both in order to get paid for the crop in time to pay end-of-year bills and to buy Christmas gifts, and because farmers have noted that after the Christmas break prices often drop as tobacco companies begin to see their demand fulfilled. With contracting, farmers now have much less control over when they can bring their crop to the receiving station, as I will discuss. According to Phil Sharp, "Well the quicker you could get it to market the- It's just like uh somebody going to table, after they get so much they don't get as hungry as they do, when they about got their bellies full and maybe if you was on the tail end of the market you wouldn't do quite as good if you was if you was on the first end of the market." Many farmers also have winter calves being born in January and

February and generally have to feed cattle up to twice a day, so attention needs to be turned there.

Ultimately, the weather dictates when tobacco can be stripped, and I've been told of years that farmers didn't get their tobacco stripping finished until as late as April, as they waited on the weather. Patsy Perkins told me a story of a year that they finished stripping tobacco just in time for her to sew Easter dresses for her daughters. Martin didn't begin stripping his 2007 crop until December, in part because it was late as described above, but also because he had to wait until the weather was right to take it down out of the barn or *book it down*. The dry early fall that most growers experienced became a wet late fall and winter for Martin—circumstances from which he benefited in the end, as his tobacco cured well, becoming the dark brown-red color that the companies want to buy rather than the tan, *yellow*, or *bright* tobacco that so many growers ended up with. More than once, Martin told me this:

Martin: I had one thing in my advantage, I did have a red crop, whereas, if it'd been earlier, it might have piebald. [...]

Ann: Which is what most people have right?

Martin: Yeah that's what most people have. Uh, as a matter of fact I, took a load of tobacco to, warehouse last week and, the buyer said "Well, we got a load of *burley* tobacco today!" [*laugh*] (2/07/08)

Having good quality tobacco is always a source of pride, and in the 2007 crop year it was even more so because it was rare. This meant even more to him because of the way it looked earlier in the season. The day I accompanied him as he was dropping sticks, he pointed out a particularly tall patch of tobacco. I asked if in better years it all looked like that and he said, oh yes, "this is the commonest tobacco crop I've had in years."

Martin wasn't the only one noticing his crop. One day in December, I was visiting with a farmer on Martin's side of the county, and we were joined by another farmer. They talked about the poor quality of most growers' tobacco that year, and then the second farmer (who I presumed did not know that I knew Martin, although he may have) said, "I'll tell you who is gonna have some good tobacco is Martin Henson." He went on to describe Martin's tobacco as being late and therefore small and dark—just what they want this year—and that Martin had stripped some last week and but had not gotten any more down since. Martin won't touch it if it's not just right, he said.

*Stripping* tobacco is the process of removing the cured leaves of tobacco from the stalk and separating it into grades before packaging it for sale. Stripping begins with *booking* or *bulking*<sup>62</sup> the cured tobacco, which means climbing back up into the tiers of the barn and dropping the sticks of tobacco down into a *bulk* or pile of tobacco; sometimes it is simply called *getting it down* or *putting it down*. The tobacco is taken off of the stick and stacked on a wagon, sometimes in tied bundles and sometimes loose. The empty sticks are stacked in the barn—also sometimes in bundles, sometimes loose—for use the next year.

As described above, the tobacco must be *in case* when it is *booked down* so that it can be handled without being damaged, but it cannot not be *too casey* or in *high case* (too wet) because then the risk is that it will rot after it is stripped and baled. According to Jerry Bond:

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<sup>62</sup> The term "bulk" is most often cited in written sources (cf van Willigen and Eastwood), but both "book" and "bulk" are used by different farmers and mean the same thing. Because I heard "book" most often I chose to use it here.

You have to, be knowledgeable enough [...] when you just go out and feel of it, if it's too dry, or too wet, or just right. And some people can do that and some can't. And the ones that can't suffer when they get to the market cause if it's too dry you're giving up poundage. Because wet tobacco's gonna weigh more-it's absorbed moisture. If it's too wet, they won't buy it. So it's got to be just right. And there are a few people- Most everybody around here can- But there are some that don't have a clue when they go out in the barn, and and grab the tobacco and know if it's ready to be stripped. It's an art. It's an art. (J. and K. Bond)

Tatham's 1800 description suggests that judging when to book down has long been considered a specialized skill. He describes the term "in Case" as "a technical term made use of by the planters to signify a specific condition of the plants, which can only be judged of safely by long experience" (37).

Often it is at its best in the middle of a damp night, and farmers such as Jerry Bond told me stories of their fathers waking them up in the middle of the night to book the tobacco down; sometimes they began to strip it then, sometimes they waited until morning. This is yet another aspect of tobacco production that has changed with the changing labor situation; for farmers that depend on paid labor rather than family or community-based labor, it is most often not possible to book down at the optimum time because it is not practical to expect paid laborers to come to work on short notice in the middle of the night. Some growers, particularly large growers, have come to depend on methods of bringing tobacco into case so that it can be booked down at any time, such as spraying it with water (a practice other growers describe with disdain). Loads of tobacco are often covered with plastic once it is down in order to hold in the moisture until it is brought into the stripping room.

I arrived at Martin's one cold, damp Saturday morning in December. Martin had gotten his crew started stripping tobacco around 7 a.m., and he was in the process of feeding cattle. I rode in the truck with him, staying put each time he got out to fill the feeders with buckets of feed, with his small dog Buster asleep on my lap. The deep winter mud had frozen, making it difficult for Martin to walk; he'd had ankle surgery in October and was still wearing a cast protected by a large rubber boot. His friend Elic had been helping him around the farm since his surgery and, although he didn't mention it to me, Elic later told me that this was one of the first times Martin had fed the cattle on his own since his surgery. After he finished feeding, he and another guy who'd turned up started to work on a highboy that wouldn't start and that Martin needed to move into his equipment shed, so I rode over with Elic to feed his cattle on a nearby farm. By the time we returned, they had the highboy running and were moving on to a tractor that was giving him problems, so Elic drove the highboy over to where it needed to go, and I followed in his truck to bring him back. Then Martin headed out on the tractor to feed hay to the cattle, and Elic got me started on *tips* in the *stripping room*.

Martin's stripping room is set up much like others in which I stripped tobacco or visited and like those described to me many times from memory. Traditionally, a stripping room is a small narrow rectangular room, about twelve feet wide by twenty feet long, attached to a tobacco barn and in which a farmer's tobacco is stripped from the stalk and readied for sale. A great deal of nostalgia pervades descriptions of stripping rooms of the past, whether given to me in interviews or in brief conversations with strangers who learn of my research. Families spent the fall and often much of the winter together in the stripping room, and these times are described as multi-generational, full of

stories, warm from the stove (wood, coke, or gas), and pervaded by the pleasant smell (as well as the less pleasant dust) of cured tobacco. Dinner and sometimes supper were heated or cooked on the stove, the smallest children played or slept on a corner of the stripping bench, a dog usually lay under the stripping bench, neighbors stopped by, and the radio (later, sometimes, a TV) played in the background. I commented to Phyllis and Phil Sharp during our interview that people often talked about stripping rooms as important places of family memories, and Phyllis responded,

Oh yeah it was like a gathering place in the wintertime with the neighbors you know, uh if they weren't stripping or they just wanted to come and hang out, they would come and, you would have like a big pot of beans and cornbread or a big pot of chili, a big pot of soup on the old stove in the stripping room and, um and the radio going and it- Yeah, it was hard work but a lot of good memories and a lot of quality time with your family.

Conventional stripping rooms have the same basic floor plan: a wooden bench about three feet wide and waist high runs along the length of one wall. There is usually a door leading into the stripping room from the barn, where wagon loads of tobacco await and where tobacco stalks and finished bales will be brought. The wall parallel to the bench usually houses the stove and, since the late 70s or early 80s, a set of three baling boxes and an air compressor. Instead of a baling box, stripping rooms of the past featured a wall-mounted tobacco press, where sticks of tobacco tied in hands were flattened in preparation for sale. The replacement of the wall press with a set of baling boxes represents the most often cited change in tobacco production: the move from hands to bales. Some stripping rooms, including Martin's, also now include sets of wooden

boxes in the middle of the room where tobacco is put, by grade, between the time it is stripped and when it is baled.

Armfuls of cured tobacco are brought from the wagon into the stripping room and laid on the bench. The leaves are stripped off into grades, which are determined based on a combination of stalk position, size, color, and texture. At one time, a single stalk of tobacco was stripped into as many as seven or eight grades; three is now the norm, although the companies would prefer four. The names of grades of tobacco differ somewhat by family, community, and region, and vernacular names differ from those once used by government graders (who had a far more complex and numerous range of grades than those used on the farm, as many as 109 at one time [Duncan 11/29/07]) and those used by tobacco companies (who each have their own system). For instance, Charlie Long of Hart County remembers these seven grades from his younger days: *buzzard trash*, *good trash*, *lugs* or *flyings*, *tan leaf*, *red leaf* (sometimes *short* and *long*), *short tips*, and *long tips*. Martin remembers *trash*, *lug*, *long lug*, *short red*, *long red*, *tip*, and *short tip*. Today's grades—which have dominated for the last couple of decades—are fairly consistently known as *trash* or *flyings*, *lugs* or *cutters* (it is this middle grade that Philip Morris would like to see divided into two, resulting in four grades), and *tips*. Some farmers also have a *crop throw* grade in which they bale together their lowest quality leaves of all grades—green leaves, piebald leaves, leaves swept from the stripping room floor—in order to improve the overall quality of their other bales in hopes of a higher price; they'll get something for their bales of *crop throw*, however small. It seems to be becoming more common to refer to the grades by number, perhaps because of the language barrier between many farmers and the Hispanic men (and sometimes women)



who strip tobacco for them. I often heard farmers refer to the three grades as *ones*, *twos*, and *threes* when talking with Hispanic workers.

During a couple of brief periods in the 1980s and 90s, some farmers stripped their tobacco into only one grade, and opinions differ on the reason and the outcome. I've been given two explanations for this, explanations that at first seem similar but in fact differ in interesting ways. Mostly, I've been told that the demand for tobacco at the time was higher than the supply, and so the tobacco companies would take whatever farmers had to offer, the implication being that farmers had the upper hand, however briefly. But, I have also been told that the buying of tobacco in one or two grades was strategic on the part of the companies; in one version of this theory R.J. Reynolds was responsible for tobacco being graded into two grades because they could use it all, and in another, Philip Morris actively encouraged farmers to strip their tobacco into one grade in order to gain control of the market. While other companies, particularly smaller buyers representing European interests, wanted specific grades of tobacco in specific quantities and therefore were not interested in buying mixed grade tobacco, Philip Morris could use it all in their blends. This version reverses the power relationship between the farmers and the companies, while also serving as an origin narrative for how Philip Morris came to hold the power that they currently hold. Regardless of the reason, some argue that this period marked a low point in the quality of Kentucky burley, and some farmers continued to strip their tobacco in multiple grades even though the market at the time did not pay them for it.

I asked Martin about the period in which tobacco was stripped into one grade (he'd never mentioned it to me in a year of work and talk), and I got this response:

Martin: Yeah. I never did do that. But yeah, back in the, in the 80s the mid 80s, uh, you could strip it in three grades and get the same amount of money that you could in, two or one. That was, I don't know three or four years. And um, a lot of people- of course it cost money to, strip it, [...] It costs two or three cents extra on the pound to pass it down and strip it- You gotta pick that stalk up again. [...] You take uh eight thousand stalks to the acre, and, pick up eight thousand stalks an extra time, or two, it takes you know it adds up yeah. [...]

Ann: So why didn't you ever do that?

Martin: I always thought there was two or three grades on tobacco. (2/7/08)

Tobacco is stripped beginning with the bottom leaves (*trash* or *flyings*), followed by the *cutter* or *lugs* and finally the *tips*. Most stripping rooms are organized so that each person strips one grade and then passes the stalk down the bench to another person who will strip the next grade, but some are organized so that each person strips all the grades off of each stalk; opinions differ on which is more efficient. Learning the difference between the grades is obviously the first skill that one must acquire when learning to strip tobacco, and beginners are started on tips since it is not possible to make a mistake when that is all that is left on the stalk. I repeatedly heard versions of the following description, this one given to me by Charlene Long in September 2005,

When you started out, strippin' with the family, usually- When you were little you got the tips. You got the end of it 'cause you couldn't mess the tips up. Well when you got up oh around 10 or 11 or maybe 12 when you was getting' up, you might venture down to the red leaf, or they might put you on the end with the trash. But those would be the next, those would be your next step. But usually your best tobacco stripper was the one that stripped what we call the "lugs," or the "flying."

The bottom or *trash* grade is called such because, as I was often told, it looks "trashy."

The name also reflects the changing values of the various grades according to the needs

of tobacco companies. At one time, the “trash” was of no value; later it was the most valuable. It is now once again of least value.<sup>63</sup>

The *trash* consists of the leaves closest to the ground, and they are often crumbly, light in color, thinner than the others. As you move up the stalk, the leaves thicken and become darker until finally you get to the tips, which are smaller and should be a dark brown-red—not “bright” as so much tobacco was at the sale of the 2007 crop. I was usually started on tips in the handful of stripping rooms that I worked briefly in, and I was happy with this, afraid that I would get it wrong and have some negative impact, however small, on the quality of the crop. But, the more tobacco I stripped, the more I could see and feel the grades; I could even begin to see how it could be graded into more than three grades. The stalks, now empty of their leaves, are stacked on the bench or on a wooden stick rack. Periodically, the stalks are carried out to a wagon and later scattered in the field where they will degrade and be disked into the ground in the spring, returning nitrogen to the soil. Some growers chop the stalks before scattering them on the field.

There have been numerous attempts to mechanize the tobacco stripping process, including “knot hole devices” that yank the stalk through a hole and strip off the leaves, and “stripping wheels” which are large wheels that rotate horizontally; cups are attached to the wheel to hold the stalks, and workers strip the leaves off as the wheel rotates. Although many of these devices have been tried, thus far none have caught on widely, and most have been abandoned after a short time of use. Many farmers tried mechanical stripping machines during the late 1980s, when there was a general push for

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<sup>63</sup> According to Joseph C. Robert, the name “trash” was used for the bottom grade before the advent of the burley-blend cigarette; “But with the great popularity of the cigarette the once ‘trash’ developed into the most valuable part of the plant” (221).

mechanization because of a decline in available labor. The Perkins family bought a stripping machine but stopped using it after just two or three years because it was so noisy that they could no longer talk to one another while they worked, and it was hard to keep up the pace required in order to get the optimum benefits of using it. Tobacco farm families have long had some paid labor in the stripping room; at mid-century, for instance, this was a job that widows often did. It is now becoming more common to have Hispanic workers strip all of the tobacco, as farmers without family help are busy managing other aspects of their farm operations.

Martin tries to spend at least part of each day at stripping tobacco time in the stripping room with his crew, and it is obvious that this had led to a comfortable and even playful atmosphere. The first day that I stripped tobacco at Martin's I stood beside him, after he finished feeding and joined us in the stripping room, as his crew (two Hispanic men and an older white man, whom I had met the first time I met Martin) joked with each other and with him, Spanish-language radio blaring in the background. As we worked, he told me things that I'd heard from him and other farmers before, for instance that when he was young they stripped into seven grades and that the trash used to bring the most money, but now it's the tips that the tobacco companies want.

I asked him why the companies valued the grades differently than they once had, and he said he didn't know. Others have told me that the most nicotine is in the tips, and once manufacturers of cigarettes were no longer allowed to add extra nicotine they started wanting more tips; and still others have told me that different companies simply want different styles of tobacco. Generally speaking, mystery shrouds the decisions and

actions of the major cigarette companies. A January 1994 comment by the Commissioner of Agriculture in the Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter makes this clear, asking, “Ever wonder why tobacco farmers seem to be in a continual state of confusion and frustration? Maybe it’s because the tobacco companies want it that way” (2).<sup>64</sup> Although he is talking about the drastic swings in demand for tobacco at this time, it applies more generally to the relationship between farmers and tobacco companies. By keeping farmers guessing over the years about desired grades and characteristics within those grades, the tobacco companies have consistently been able to name the price with little or no explanation; this was the case with the tobacco program in place and is even more the case under contracting.

At one point on this first day of stripping at Martin’s, he handed me a *hand* of tobacco—he’d tied it so quickly, I hadn’t even noticed he was tying it—and said, “This is the way we used to do it. You can take that with you.” Leaves of cured tobacco were long tied into what is referred to as a *hand* in preparation for sale.<sup>65</sup> A hand of tobacco is formed as the leaves are stripped from the stem in a particular grade. The stems are held tightly in one hand, leaves pointed toward the floor. When a handful has been stripped, a leaf of the same grade called a *tie leaf* is wrapped around the stems multiple times and then woven through the hands, holding the hand together. Simple as this may sound, tying a “pretty” hand of tobacco—and “pretty” is frequently used to describe how a hand should look—is far from easy, and was a skill that farmers took great pride in and a skill

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<sup>64</sup> This is a rare moment for the newsletter, as I will discuss in the next chapter; the fifty years of newsletters prior to this paint a picture of a close working relationship between the KDA and the companies.

<sup>65</sup> Tatham makes it clear that hands were tied in colonial times. Some have postulated that hand-tying was learned from Native Americans (see Poage), but I have yet to find sources that confirm this.

believed not to be shared equally among everyone in a stripping room. The stems were to be perfectly even. The size of the handful varied (depending on the human hand holding it), but smaller seems to have been better at one time—I’ve heard many descriptions of grandfathers who took pride in the “tiny little hands” of tobacco that they tied. The tie leaf was often a specially chosen leaf of just the right color and texture, and, when found, it was often held under the arm until the time came to use it. The tie itself took a particular skill in order to produce an even band around the butt end of the hand and to be sure that the stem end of the tie leaf did not protrude. Often finished hands of tobacco were *skirted*—the best looking leaves in the grade would be slipped under the tie leaf of the finished hand, forming a skirt around the entire hand; these hands would later be placed on the top of the pile of tobacco at sale time.

As each hand was tied, it was hung on a tobacco stick hanging from a hole in the bench until the stick was full, which generally meant twelve to fourteen hands. Each full stick of tobacco was placed in the press that hung on the wall and pressed flat; it was then carried out to the barn where it was booked, by grade, until it was time to take it to the warehouse. When the tobacco was brought to market, the hands were removed from the stick and carefully packed on tobacco baskets (large square baskets, about four feet across), fanned out in a circular pattern with the tied ends to the outside, into *piles*—still segregated by grade—that weighed between 400 and 700 pounds and were four or five feet tall.<sup>66</sup> Farmers were very particular about the packing of their baskets—both because of the economic advantage that they saw in high quality tobacco and the pride they took in how their tobacco looked—often waiting extra time (and they might have

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<sup>66</sup> This process began in mid-nineteenth century Virginia (Greene 18) and reached Lexington, Kentucky, in 1904 (Axton 86).

already waited all day or more to unload) to get the warehouse employee they preferred. The piles were moved around with small carts called *duck bills*, lined up in rows, graded by government graders, and each was then auctioned separately. Once auctioned, the hands were then packed into hogsheads for shipment.

This all began to change in the 1970s, as extension specialists at the University of Kentucky, led by agricultural engineer George Duncan and tobacco specialist Joe Smiley, began designing and building equipment for baling burley tobacco. After more than five years of research and experimentation, the move from tying tobacco into hands to packaging it in bales happened rapidly—effectively it took just three years, from 1980 to 1983—as compared to the spread of other agricultural innovations. For instance, in a well-known diffusion study of the early 1940s, researchers examined the adoption of hybrid corn, beginning with the release of hybrid seeds in 1928. These researchers, who focused on the role of social interactions between farmers in decisions to adopt innovations, found that it took an average of nine years for Iowa farmers to move to hybrid seed (rather than saving their own seed), despite the arguments of agricultural extension agents that the new seeds would increase their yields and make harvesting easier.<sup>67</sup> The story of the move from hands to bales is a political story as much as it is a technological one, and one with as many sides to it as there are growers, warehousemen, tobacco buyers, and extension agents—making it much too large a story to do justice to here, but I will describe some of the parts of the picture as I have been able to put it together.

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<sup>67</sup> See Rogers for a summary of this study, 31-35.

The University of Kentucky began testing tobacco baling in 1974 with thirteen Bourbon County farmers. In the late seventies, larger trials were held, comparing the labor required to package tobacco in hands, bales, and *sheets* (packaging in large burlap sheets, which had become the standard in flue-cured country but was ultimately rejected by burley farmers). In 1980, growers could choose to bale 25% of their crop, and bales constituted 12% of the burley sold that year; in 1981, the unlimited sale of baled burley tobacco began, and by 1983, 80% of burley tobacco was sold in bales (Duncan “An Overview”). Soon after, buyers would no longer accept tobacco in hands.

Martin’s story of switching to bales is reminiscent of his narrative about moving from plant beds to float beds, and it is quite typical of the stories I heard about the move: he had a baling box made by the FFA kids at the local high school, and he had one crew using it in one stripping room and another crew tying hands in a different stripping room. The crew that was tying hands ran out of tobacco and came over to work in the stripping room where the crew was baling, and “that was it,” no one would tie hands after that.

And yet, farmer resistance is the common public narrative characterizing the move from hands to bales. A 1981 letter to the editor expresses this perspective clearly:

This is the worst display of tobacco for market I have seen in my 38 years of growing burley. Packaging tobacco in bales and sheets takes all the pride out of growing a quality crop of tobacco. I suppose this is the way of the world, and what some people call progress. To me, it’s taken all the pleasure out of growing and sending a top quality crop to market. (As quoted in van Willigen and Eastwood 158)

The majority of the farmers I have talked to claim not only not to have been resistant, but that they were eager to move to bales because of the labor they would save (from 40 to



50%), suggesting either that the perspective in the letter to the editor represented a minority of farmers or that farmer acceptance of it in the intervening years has overshadowed any reluctance they had in the beginning. County agent Keenan Bishop suggested it is the latter:

You know a lot of ‘em cite that as a positive change but at the time, you know looking back it saved a lot of time. It made things easier. But when you’re used to doing hands and, your great grandfather tied it in hands and now they want you to do it in a bale, there’s a thousand reasons why that won’t work.

As I will discuss in a later chapter, many of the men I have talked to told me that their fathers expressed doubts about baling; if their fathers did not live to see tobacco in bales, these men expressed the belief that they would have been horrified. Concerns about baling included fears that the bales would retain too much moisture and would rot, some worried about “nesting” (non-tobacco matter getting into the tobacco, from unintentional garbage such as candy wrappers to items put there intentionally in order to increase the weight of a bale), many didn’t believe companies would buy it, and those like the writer quoted above just didn’t think baling tobacco was the way to treat a crop that had long been treated with *pride*. One family that I worked with tied their tobacco in hands until they were told that it would no longer be bought unless it was baled.<sup>68</sup>

According to the extension service, this was a farmer-driven innovation, fueled by the desire to cut labor costs, but one that required the technological assistance of university research. Warehouses and tobacco companies were resistant to the move because neither was equipped to handle baled tobacco and therefore they both had to

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<sup>68</sup> This is the same family that continues to raise their tobacco plants in both plant beds and water beds; they’ve also told me they were still using mules when everyone else had gone to tractors. They clearly take pride in their status as what scholars of diffusion studies call “late adopters.”

quickly adopt new equipment and procedures. I've been told that the beginning of this research was not only controversial, but it nearly cost some of those involved their jobs—so strong was the resistance of the tobacco companies from whom the university received research funding.<sup>69</sup> Some were so eager to package their tobacco in bales, that in the late 1970s, they began taking tobacco to markets in Tennessee where bales were being accepted. One farmer told me that some used hay balers when they didn't have access to the new balers the university had designed. In 1981, the unlimited sale of burley in bales became possible through changes made to the federal tobacco program.

The controversy was apparently not limited to adults, as Mark Roberts told me this:

Mark: That was very controversial, that was back when I was in school. And there were some farmers- their sons was in school with me and they owned warehouses and they did not like that change and, it was, they let it be known that they didn't think that I ought be doing that and oughta be part of that.

Ann: So other students let you know that?

Mark: Other st- Oh yeah, other students. The other children.

A history published by the Burley Auction Warehouse Association (BAWA) places the resistance largely with farmers and tobacco companies rather than warehouses; BAWA concludes a brief overview of the “controversy” by stating, “Gone were the nostalgic wooden baskets filled with carefully hand-tied tobacco leaves. In their place were row upon row of hundred-pound bales. The new look seemed more efficient, and it was certainly less costly for growers and warehousemen. But an era had definitely ended”

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<sup>69</sup> One former University of Kentucky faculty member referred to this period as the “baling wars” and referenced faculty getting into “hot water” for conducting research on baling. (L. Davis)

(BAWA 103). This sense of nostalgia pervades many discussions of tying hands, even for those who would never go back.

Ironically, although farmers certainly benefited greatly from the move to bales, the warehouses and companies benefited even more. The amount of labor that was saved unloading seventy to ninety pound bales, versus packing baskets with individual hands that weighed less than a pound, was substantial. By the mid-80s, a system for dealing with bales became the standard that continues today (but is being replaced by five to six-hundred pound bales, as I will discuss): six to eight bales (depending on the warehouse and the year) are unloaded onto a cardboard *slip sheet* and then bound together with metal bands to become the *pile* of tobacco,<sup>70</sup> still weighing close to seven hundred pounds, that is sold as a unit just as the basket of tobacco had once been. For a number of years, the top bale was split open for inspection; this practice was eventually abandoned as new technologies were introduced to test for moisture at the warehouse. Moving this pile onto a semi-trailer with a forklift after the sale, rather than repacking it into a hogshead, proved labor-saving for the tobacco companies.

The technology for baling the now conventional seventy to ninety pound bale of burley tobacco has not changed since baling was introduced. A *baling box* is actually three connected boxes, usually made of plywood although some were made of metal for a while, with an air compressor, or in some cases a car jack, that is moved between the three boxes to compress the bales. Many farmers built their baling boxes based on plans made available by the University of Kentucky, while others like Martin bought their baling boxes from the local high school's chapter of the Future Farmers of America, who

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<sup>70</sup> Metal bands were not established as a standard means of binding the pile until the mid-90s.

made them as fundraising projects, or from local entrepreneurs. One such entrepreneur, Maurice Corn of Anderson County, Kentucky, estimates that he sold between eleven and twelve thousand baling boxes over the years, including many that he made completely by hand and others that he later finished from pieces manufactured elsewhere.

The process of stripping tobacco changed little with the introduction of baling. However, as Roger Quarles pointed out to me, baling introduced a much greater diversity in stripping room practices than had existed with hand tying.

Then when we went to the uh, the bale package, you didn't have to- well it was just up to you really how you got it into the uh the bale package, whether you left it in your hand or whether you just uh, shucked it off and put it in sort of an organized pile and then put your arms around a larger bunch and took it over to the, to the uh bale box which was again compressed, to, to make a sturdy package. (1/31/08)<sup>71</sup>

In the stripping rooms I worked in or visited, tobacco is still stripped in the manner described above and then neatly laid in a pile on the stripping bench rather than held in a hand, stems pointing toward the person stripping. The piles are then either placed, by grade, into an intermediary box or directly into the baling box that holds the appropriate grade. The intermediary boxes are placed a couple of feet from the bench so that the person stripping the leaves can pick up a pile as it grows large and turn around and place it in the box without walking across the room. In other stripping rooms, the piles of stripped leaves are walked directly from the bench to the baling box. In either case, the piles are alternated as they are placed in the twelve by thirty-six inch baling boxes, so that

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<sup>71</sup> This is just one example among many of greater diversity between farmers in how they now do things. Of course farmers have always had their own ways of doing things, but at one time they were much more alike than they are today. There's less typicality, and many practices are timed and compared by extension researchers so that labor-savings can be quantified and practices recommended.

the stems are butted up against the sides of the box and line both ends of the finished bale. The box of tobacco is periodically compressed, and when the baling box is full to the appropriate point of twenty-four to twenty-six inches high (some have a “full” line drawn with a marker) it is compressed a final time, the front of the baling box is opened, the bale is tied with cotton twine, and it is removed from the box and stacked in the barn. In large, non-conventional stripping rooms (discussed below), there may be one or more person(s) whose entire job is bringing tobacco in, packing the baling boxes with piles of graded tobacco, and removing the stalks and bales to the barn.

Finished bales are then stacked in the barn until they are brought to be sold. I will return to issues of pride and nostalgia around the marketing of tobacco in later chapters, but here it is important to point out that the aesthetics that were attached to tying hands moved to baling tobacco and still exists, although it varies widely in practice. Farmers continue to have a strong idea about what a good bale of tobacco should look like—the stems should be evenly lined up on the ends as though they’d been shaved off with a chainsaw, the color should be consistent throughout the bale, there should not be loose leaves sticking out—even if many can no longer attain this aesthetic goal because they do not strip and bale all or perhaps any of it themselves. Many farmers no longer strip any tobacco, while farmers like Martin still strip part of it between other duties, and others continue to strip all of it themselves.

The effect of appearance on the price that tobacco ultimately brings, currently or in the past, is a complicated topic. Some of the farmers I have spoken with swear that presentation was once a determining factor. For instance, Donald Morse, a former farmer and warehousemen told me, “Dad was a pretty neat farmer, and back at that time neatness

went a long way. Um, quality of course went further, but neatness was a big factor in selling your tobacco.” Others have told me that the aesthetic that farmers were reaching for was not required by the tobacco companies.

Ann: I’ve heard that a lot of people took real pride, in their, their hands of tobacco?

Maurice Corn: Oh, you better believe it. They, some people could make the, the messiest- you ever saw. But a lot of people really, I have uh, seen crops where every hand was the same and, prettyiest you ever saw. But they don’t- The buyers wouldn’t give you a bit more than that than they will the other.

Ann: Oh really?

Maurice Corn: No

Ann: So it didn’t help your price?

Maurice Corn: Didn’t help your price but it, but a lot of people just, you know, didn’t like sloppy tobacco.

Similarly, Noel Wise talked about appearance, and he used bales rather than hands as the example.

Ann: A pretty hand didn’t bring a better price?

Noel Wise: I never did see it, no. Tobacco companies didn’t fall for that. It’s hard to fool that tobacco company. [...] And I have seen on a tobacco market floor, when we had, the auction system. They first started that baling and here was a person that every stem even on the end of his bale. Boy it was a pretty thing to look at, you know he’d put a lot of time into it. *[laugh]* And I have uh, seen these tobacco buyers come by there and they’d knock that over there they wanna see what’s under say, “That’s on top now what’s underneath?”

According to Corn and Wise, neatness did not determine the price (and Wise seems to argue that being *too* neat raised suspicions), but they all thought it did or at least acted as

though it did. In other words, there was a pretense that they were performing for the tobacco companies when in fact they were performing for one another.

Some farmers still recognize the effect that aesthetic qualities have on the price that their tobacco brings even in the very different current climate of tobacco marketing, while others insist that it does not matter. The consistency of the color of the leaves throughout the bale is one visual aspect that certainly makes a difference because the color determines the grade put on it by the grader, and if a bale is a solid color that means it is all of the same grade, and it will therefore bring a higher price. Because grading is still done visually—a grader assigning a grade to a pile of tobacco based on what he can see as it moves past him on a conveyor belt—it is hard to believe that neatness does not have some impact, if only at the extremes.

In some cases, the conventional stripping room is undergoing a range of changes, another example of the increased lack of typicality among tobacco producers. While some large farmers have multiple conventional stripping rooms going at one time, others have moved out of the stripping room altogether—stripping tobacco on the back of a wagon out in the open in the early fall or in the central corridor of a barn in order to accommodate a large crew of fifteen to twenty people (the most I’ve seen working at one time in a conventional stripping room is seven), moving the operation from place to place in order to be near the tobacco rather than bringing the tobacco to a central location. The greatest changes to stripping rooms, however, involve the movement from the small bales I’ve just described to large bales weighing five to six hundred pounds. These large bales require a new baler as well as a much larger stripping space and a forklift or other similar equipment to move the bales around.

The push for a move to large bales is coming not from farmers but from tobacco companies. Philip Morris, in particular, is pushing for large bales because of the labor-saving benefits it will provide to them, and the company has offered some farmers cost-sharing opportunities to encourage them to make the switch. Many farmers, on the other hand, see large bales as a cost that will bring them little return, benefiting companies much more than farmers. Although there is often the possibility of some degree of labor saving (Mark Roberts sees a tremendous savings in his operation), it varies greatly by farm, and both farmers and extension agents agree that in many cases the costs outweigh the benefits. The labor savings come from less frequent compression and removal, and from the loss of the need to orient the stems because tobacco leaves go into the big baler with no particular orientation, or as *tangled leaf*. The costs are many: the baling boxes themselves with one to three needed at several thousand dollars apiece; if only one is purchased in order to save upfront costs, labor savings may be lost since two grades will have to be boxed until time to bale them, which means double the labor since that tobacco will be walked from the stripping bench to a large holding area and then from box to baler. In addition, it is necessary to have equipment with which to move the bales around, and a new, large stripping space with a flat floor; not only are conventional stripping rooms too small but most, like the barns they are attached to, have earthen floors.

There is no information available about the percentage of farmers who have made this switch, but the majority of have not. Although at this point it is primarily the largest farmers that are making the move, many see the eventual move to big bales as inevitable—although many do not believe that they themselves will benefit, they believe



that eventually the manufacturers will require them to make the switch, another possible point at which the small grower will be squeezed out. Many of the arguments being made for and against large bales are identical to those made about small bales in the early 1980s—such as concerns about “nesting” and moisture content—but so far the move to large bales is much slower because for the majority of farmers the benefits are just not there.

## **Marketing**

The marketing of tobacco has of course changed significantly since the 2004 buyout, which brought with it the end of the tobacco auction. Beginning with Philip Morris’ “Partnering” program in 2000, many farmers had in fact begun to contract directly with companies before the buyout. The auction system developed and evolved over the centuries, but was basically in place by the early twentieth century. Throughout the twentieth century, the opening of the market season was an important event marked by local festivals and widely covered by the media. For instance, in 1939 the opening of the markets in Lexington, for many years the largest burley marketing center, included “a parade, the crowning of a movie star as queen, a carnival, and French follies” (Greene 53). Year after year, the same action photograph was taken and published to commemorate the opening of sales: men in trench coats and fedora hats lined up on both sides of a row of piles of tobacco, in the midst of the first day of sales. The photo usually included the warehouseman, the auctioneer, the ticket marker, eight to ten buyers, and often a political figure such as the commissioner of agriculture or the governor, showing

his support of Kentucky's largest cash crop through his presence on opening day.<sup>72</sup> The sound of the chant of the tobacco auctioneer has become an iconic American sound (in part through radio advertisements such as the American Tobacco Company's which featured the chant ending with "Sold American!"), and it became a focal point of nostalgia when tobacco warehouses closed their doors.<sup>73</sup>

The tobacco sales season opens in November and remains open until farmers are finished selling tobacco; while this depends on the weather and when farmers are able to finish stripping, it generally means sometime in February, with a break at Christmas. The marketing season once opened up additional employment possibilities for farmers who were able to finish stripping their tobacco early. At one time, of course, having a truck and trailers with which to haul tobacco to market was rare, and many farmers made additional money trucking tobacco to market. Other farmers worked at one of their local warehouses during the season, as warehouses depended greatly on seasonal help. Several farmers told me that their first job off the farm, as young men, was packing baskets at a tobacco warehouse.

Delivering tobacco to the warehouse often meant sitting in a line of trucks stretched down the street for hours—stories are told of being in line all day or even multiple days. Trucks loaded with tobacco would sometimes be left parked in a line over night, and security guards were hired to watch them. When a farmer's turn came, his or her tobacco would be unloaded onto baskets, weighed, and ticketed, and a date set for it to be auctioned. This was important information because farmers never missed the sale

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<sup>72</sup> Prints of such scenes have also been produced, as part of the tobacco "way of life" as "art" movement that I describe in Chapter 5. One such print was given to me by a former warehouseman.

<sup>73</sup> R.J. Reynolds began to sponsor tobacco auctioneer contests in the 1980s.

of their tobacco. Sometimes the whole family would come back for the sale, often standing by the tobacco to remind the buyers that the family depended on their tobacco income in hopes of bringing a higher price; it is said that fifths of whiskey, country hams, and young pretty daughters were placed on top of many a pile of tobacco as encouragement for a good price.

Families didn't always come to the auction, however, and warehouses provided some tobacco men with time away from farm and family—time in which to drink and play cards, and in some cases to lose their hard-earned tobacco money before the piles had even been sold. The warehouse business was highly competitive, and warehousemen used a host of solicitation techniques to bring in farmers. Handing out pints of liquor to every farmer that wanted one was fairly standard at one time, and warehouses often gave away meal tickets for use in local restaurants at meal times (and I've been told the owners of the warehouses were often also the owners of the restaurants). By the end of the warehouse system, warehouses had begun to give out ball caps with their logos printed on them instead of alcohol. Warehouses hired solicitors that would make farm visits throughout the year, drumming up business for the coming season.

The relationship between farmers, warehousemen, and buyers was a complex one, but generally farmers saw warehousemen as filling a role that was predominantly helpful to them. It was in the interest of the warehouseman to keep a farmer happy since he could decide to take his tobacco elsewhere in the days in which there were multiple warehouses in most tobacco marketing centers, and so he might provide encouragement for buyers to pay a good price for a particular farmer's tobacco, he might re-pack tobacco so that it looked its best, and or he might even buy it himself to resell later, occasionally

at a loss. According to one former warehouseman, describing what happened when the house bought some tobacco, “On occasion you will make some money on a pile of tobacco. Or, what you really hope to do is to break even. And satisfy that customer” (Crain 7/31/00). There were advantages to moving to a new warehouse every now and then, as Roger Perkins described it:

You’d get some good deals the first year or two [...] You know they they’d, take care of you, I mean they’d, make sure you got a good sale. I mean just like anything else, I mean that warehouseman could make a lot of difference back in those days. And um. [...] They’d buy a pile or two of your tobacco for, a dollar or two you know above what the buyers were paying. After all, you know it’s all about them bragging rights of what the average says on the ticket so I mean you know.

At the same time, farmers obviously knew that warehousemen were profiting from the fees that they paid them to have their tobacco sold, so they never felt that they were on equal footing. Warehousemen also had to keep buyers happy, in order to keep them coming back since at one time they had many markets to choose from; for instance, in 1968 there were 245 burley tobacco warehouses in Kentucky alone (Greene 116).

Warehouses and everyone employed in them (operators or warehousemen, auctioneers, ticket markers, and office staff and other warehouse employees) were put out of business as farmers moved to direct contracting in the early twenty-first century, followed by the buyout. Towns across tobacco country are struggling with what do with these massive empty buildings; many can’t afford to tear them down, and as they age safety concerns grow.

I had been told many times that a tobacco warehouse was “the coldest place on earth,” and I learned this firsthand when I attended a sale day at one of three burley tobacco warehouses struggling to remain in operation—on a very small scale—in Kentucky, Farmers Tobacco Warehouse in Danville. Ben Crain, former R.J. Reynolds buyer and Lexington warehouseman, offered to take me to the sale, which he participated in as a buyer. He told me that this was the closest thing to a “good old-fashioned auction” that I’d be able to see. Indeed, the major differences between this auction and the many descriptions that I have heard can be found primarily in the number of participants and the speed with which the sales are made.

The warehouse—a huge building, larger than a football field—was full of rows of piles of tobacco that had been delivered in preceding days. The rows were numbered, and each had a list of names of the farmers whose tobacco was in the row; each pile had a ticket on it that was filled out when the grower delivered the tobacco. It is the picking up of this ticket that is the signal for the start of the sale of each pile. The participants on this day included the warehouseman, auctioneer, and two other warehouse employees on one side of the row of piles and four buyers across from them. There were a number of growers there—presumably everyone that had tobacco being auctioned—following along behind the warehousemen and the auctioneer. As the group approached each pile of tobacco, the ticket was picked up by a warehouse employee and handed to the warehouseman, who started the bidding process. The auctioneer took up the opening price with his chant, and then the buyers placed their bids in a mixture of gestures and words that were mostly incomprehensible to me; the auctioneer announced the final price in abbreviated form (he’d say, for instance, “58” instead of a “a dollar fifty-eight”), wrote

the grade, the price, and the symbol of the buyer on the ticket, and dropped it back on the pile. This all happened very quickly, although not nearly as quickly as the auctions in the days before the buyout, when five or six hundred piles of tobacco would be sold per hour by one auctioneer. According to former warehouseman Ben Crain, in those days a sale would occasionally be stopped so that the group could return to look again at a pile that had been sold because a buyer might say “that pile that I bought back there is following me” (Crain 2/04/08). But stopping the sale was avoided whenever possible so that the rhythm of the sale would not be interrupted.

During this sale, I followed along with the small group of growers. We trailed behind the sale, looking at the marked tickets once the corresponding pile had been sold—sometimes because it was theirs but mostly just to see how it was selling—and we compared the tickets and discussed the fairness of the prices that the tobacco was bringing. One grower I spoke with represents one type of circumstance that brings growers to sell their tobacco at auction now. He raised about 10,000 pounds (about four or five acres), about 3000 pounds more than he had contracted to sell to a tobacco company. Because the companies were not buying much over contract this year, he needed to sell his 3000 pounds of *carryover* somehow, and the auction was one of the options that he had to choose from. *Carryover* is a term reflecting the days of the quota system; under the tobacco program, if you ended up growing more pounds than your quota permitted, you could carry a small amount over to the next year. This grower was considering selling all of his tobacco at the warehouse the following year rather than contracting with a manufacturer, if he did well at this sale.

The prices ranged from \$1.25 to \$1.62 a pound on this day, with most of it in the high \$1.50 range, which was consistent with prices that growers were being paid on contract, although at the auction they would not see incentives of up to ten cents a pound, and they paid a fee for the service of the warehouse. The buyers at this sale reflected another great difference from the classic tobacco auctions, in that they were neither buyers for large tobacco companies nor leaf buyers for multiple companies worldwide. Instead, they were buying for growers who were otherwise not going to meet their contract poundage and therefore lose incentives, the Burley Co-op (who bought about two million pounds this year with plans to establish marketing relationships in China),<sup>74</sup> and *the house* (meaning Farmers Tobacco Warehouse). The warehouseman, Jerry Rankin, later told me that a number of the farmers that were selling their carryover were selling the least desirable tobacco through the warehouse, or they were selling tobacco that was not graded and baled in a manner that *showed* well. Jerry buys most of the tobacco that sells through his warehouse himself, and then he repacks it according to the needs of the companies to whom he hopes to sell it. He expected to see about three million pounds of burley go through his warehouse, less than half of the approximately eight million pounds that would have gone through his warehouse in a good year in earlier times. He was taking a considerable risk since he had no guaranteed buyers. Jerry told me in an interview, “What I’m doing at the warehouse right now is pretty much spinning my wheels. I’m offering a service I guess” because he has only made a profit

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<sup>74</sup> The Burley Co-op has since begun to develop such relationships and planned to buy 6 million pounds of the 2008 crop and ultimately buy at least 10 million pounds a year. The role of the Co-op has been questioned by some since the buy-out since there are no longer pool stocks to be managed, and they are working to establish a role for themselves as a true co-op in this new marketing environment.

two years since contracting began and has either broken even or operated in the red the other years.

Of course very little tobacco is sold at auction today. Most is brought to receiving stations set up by individual companies by growers that have signed contracts, and these are very different places from warehouses. Martin and I had planned that I would go with him to sell his tobacco, finishing off the year; in the end the timing did not work out, and I was unable to accompany him on any of this three trips. He brought his first load to the receiving station just after New Year's (before I got back in town from the holidays) and sold about 13,000 pounds at an average price of \$1.52 a pound (not including his incentive of nine cents). In mid-January, he waited to hear back from Philip Morris for a week or more about when he could bring in his second load; they finally called on a Thursday and told him to bring it the next day. He later apologized as he explained to me that because rain was in the forecast, he asked them if he could bring it up that day and come back for the sale the next day, and once he got it there they went ahead conducted the sale (and he averaged \$1.56). When I left Kentucky in February he had one more load to sell.

I did go along with the Waits family (brothers Marlon and Robert and their cousin Carl, who have taken over the family farm operation from their fathers, Ray and Harold) to the Philip Morris receiving station in Frankfort in mid-December, on one of several deliveries that they made.<sup>75</sup> Under the contract system, farmers are given precise

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<sup>75</sup> I was treated with relative suspicion—although everyone was certainly friendly—by the employees and was told in clear terms what I could and could not photograph. In addition to the PM receiving station, I



appointment times for the delivery of their tobacco, and they can deliver only a specified amount each time. Many growers appreciate that they no longer have to wait in long lines to deliver their tobacco, and that they are handed a check on the same day, but they don't like the loss of their ability to choose when to deliver their tobacco—especially if circumstances such as rain arise. Martin's case certainly illustrates that farmers are forced to operate on the company's schedule, not their own. Some also express regret at the loss of personalized connections to the sale of their tobacco. Rather than a warehouse owned and staffed by local people, Philip Morris receiving stations employ a combination of local workers and company representatives from North Carolina and/or Virginia.<sup>76</sup>

Although I've been told that generally there is little or no wait at the receiving stations, we did wait a couple of hours on this particular December day. The Waits had three pickup truckloads and one very large trailer. Trucks drive directly into the building through four large overhead doors that lead to four separate unloading areas. The bales of tobacco are unloaded onto large cardboard slip sheets in stacks of six bales of the same grade of tobacco which are then banded together with three metal bands about one inch wide, making a pile or *basket* of tobacco that will move on to the graders (the Waits still use "basket," from the days of hands and baskets). Marlon had told me numerous times that they like to unload their tobacco themselves because the Philip Morris employees that unload it handle it too roughly, tossing it off the truck in a manner that could hardly be more different from the days of carefully crafted baskets of tobacco tied in hands. I

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also accompanied the Waits when they delivered a load of tobacco to the Burley Co-op, a much quicker process with no wait.

<sup>76</sup> Benson argues that "Philip Morris hires graders from various regions to ensure against biased relationships with farmers" (365).

watched that day as they managed the unloading so that their tobacco was treated with care: Carl climbed up onto the truck and handed each bale down to Robert, Marlon, and the Philip Morris workers; Robert and Marlon arranged the bales to ensure that the high quality showed.

Forklifts whizzed back and forth, moving the baskets first to a holding area until it was all unloaded and ready to be sold, and when their turn came it was moved onto a conveyor belt where the moisture level of each basket was tested, it was weighed, and then it was graded by a Philip Morris grader. The grader that handled the Waits' tobacco, whom I had met while we waited, invited me to stand with him on his elevated platform above the conveyor as he graded the Waits' tobacco. The grading system used by the tobacco companies is much more complex than the grades into which tobacco is stripped, resulting in three types of grades applied to each pile. They start with the four grades that farmers use (trash, leaf, lugs or cutters, tips), and then they add a numerical grade for quality, followed by an "internal grade" which remains somewhat of a mystery to me; the vague description given to me by this grader made it sound as though the "internal grade" is based on color, and that it determines the use that it will be put to.

Once tobacco is sold, it goes to a *redryer* or *stemmery* to be processed and then it is allowed to age for three years until it goes to its final destination, a manufacturing plant where it is made into cigarettes, pipe tobacco, or chewing tobacco. With the sale of their tobacco, farmers come to the end of the crop year. For most farmers, this didn't come until January or even February 2008. Although I wasn't able to make the trip with Martin to sell his tobacco, my last day of fieldwork pertaining to the 2007 crop year, in February 2008, was also his last day stripping tobacco. Somehow this seemed

appropriate, as did the fact that, as I interviewed him once again that day, winter calves were being born, and as I drove off he was bottle-feeding a newborn calf.

I later learned that his last load averaged \$1.54, and he not only reached his contract weight of 30,000 pounds and therefore received an additional nine cents a pound for every pound he sold, but he had about 1200 pounds of carryover that he was able to sell to another farmer that needed the weight. What had looked like a disastrous crop back in the summer turned out, for Martin, to be a decent crop. Martin and I discussed the 2007 crop in an interview just before I left in February, and he said, in part:

Martin: I was hoping that I would at least get my money back, and uh, I'm gonna do that without any trouble. ....That away it makes you feel good enough to start another crop. [*both laugh*]

Ann: As long as you get your money back you can start another crop

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Martin: Yeah you gotta get your money back [*both still laughing*] My daddy always said, 'You put your money in your crop all year, and then you get it back in one lump sum, and then you can do something with it.' You can do a whole lot more with several thousand dollars than you can, a hundred dollars here and a hundred dollars there.

Ann: Like start another crop huh?

Martin: Yeah, like start another crop. But I reckon, I reckon I'll raise about what I tried to raise last year. Of course, no two crops are the same. I've been raising tobacco since I was nine years old and, and never have two crops the same. It's always different.

### CHAPTER 3: Tracing the Shifting Rhetorics of Tobacco: The Kentucky Department of Agriculture Newsletters, 1944-2008

The Kentucky Department of Agriculture began the publication of a regular newsletter in February 1944, and it continues today.<sup>77</sup> In this chapter, I will examine the KDA News as a rhetorical site that offers an important perspective on the changing political contexts of tobacco farming in Kentucky in the second half of the twentieth century and the turn to the twenty-first century. In Chapter 1, I provided a meta-history of tobacco in Kentucky; here, I turn a focused eye on one site that provides a particular window into part of tobacco history as it was happening. I have paid particular attention to two discursive categories that appear in the KDA News, heritage and diversification, because their deployment in multiple rhetorical sites—including farmer narratives—will be addressed in later chapters in which I examine the agricultural “transition” currently underway in Kentucky.

I have chosen to analyze the newsletter of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture because it offers a distinctly different perspective from those of the farmers and other participants in my fieldwork. As best as I can tell, the newsletter of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture is not particularly relevant to the majority of the

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<sup>77</sup> The name changed several times over the years so I will refer to it as “the KDA News” throughout rather than by name. Please see entries listed under Kentucky Department of Agriculture in the Bibliography for a complete list of the names and the publication dates of issues cited in this chapter. The newsletter was published monthly, with occasional exceptions, through 1982 at which point it became a quarterly publication. It is now an online publication.

farmers that I have gotten to know, suggesting that perhaps the publications and pedagogical practices of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, with which many farmers interact on a regular basis, might be a better site.<sup>78</sup> The KDA is important because, as a state government agency headed by an elected official (the Commissioner of Agriculture), it represents the governmental and political sphere of Kentucky agriculture; it presents the face of Kentucky agriculture to the citizens of Kentucky and beyond, both farmer and non-farmer alike; and it has both regulatory and policy roles to play in determining the future of Kentucky agriculture. If we are to understand farmer voices as the folk or the vernacular, then the Kentucky Department of Agriculture represents the official or the institutional—although of course such a dichotomy is not so simple. In the pages of its newsletter, a publication intended for the general public, the KDA presents issues that it deems of immediate interest and importance to Kentucky citizens, and obviously it does so in a manner that supports its own agenda. Therefore, the newsletter provides both a window into history and into the agenda of the KDA as it reported on current events.

It is important to note that the KDA News began publication during the height of the era of “new agriculture” in America, in which the government had become irreversibly involved in agriculture, and farmers were actively encouraged to farm in new ways (see Fitzgerald, Daniel, Danbom). The newsletter itself, as well as particular events, programs, and policies reported on within its pages, must be viewed within this

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<sup>78</sup> I originally intended to study the pedagogical practices of the Cooperative Extension Service as a key rhetorical site in this dissertation. I decided to focus on the KDA instead as the importance of the changed political context of tobacco became apparent. My research included interviews with a number of extension specialists and county agents, attendance at extension events, and an examination of their tobacco-related publications. Although I will not have room in this dissertation to fully address the role of the Extension Service (although the views of individual extension agents and specialists are referenced throughout the dissertation), I hope to do so in a future article.

context of increasing efforts to replace vernacular knowledge with official, research-based knowledge disseminated by the government. Of course, attempts to professionalize agriculture were far from new. As early as the 1780s, agricultural societies formed in the U.S., “in part imitating earlier English organizations, committed to seeking out and encouraging better and more productive ways of farming” (Carstensen 15), and 1862 saw both the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) elevated to an independent governmental agency, and the creation of the land grant college system through federal legislation, resulting in the creation of land grant colleges in each state that would, in part, provide agriculture education (Danbom 111-12). The first decades of the twentieth century, however, brought with them increased governmental intervention in agriculture, most notably through the creation of the Extension Service in 1914 by the Smith-Lever Act (Daniel 16)<sup>79</sup> and the enactment of New Deal legislation that created federal commodity allotment programs such as the tobacco program. With the New Deal legislation, “while nobody realized it yet, the government was in the agricultural market to stay” (Danbom 217). The World War II years have been called a “productivity revolution,” with improved crop and animal varieties, mechanization, and the introduction of petroleum based chemicals (Danbom 235-38).<sup>80</sup> This new agriculture of the 1940s—still with us today—ensured that as federal and state governments increased efforts to “help” farmers they were in effect increasing their power over them. Through

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<sup>79</sup> Although the Extension Service was officially created by the USDA in 1914, it was “[p]ioneered in Texas in 1902 by a scientist named Seaman Knapp” and quickly spread through Southern states. With the Smith-Lever Act, federal matching funds were made available through the USDA “to help states expand extension programming” (Walker *Southern Farmers* 21).

<sup>80</sup> These government programs worked against each other to the detriment of farmers in many ways, including the fact that while the Extension Service was promoting efficient farming methods in order to increase productivity, New Deal programs were being created that placed limits on production (see Danbom 213; Daniel 245).

agricultural programs and the “productivity revolution,” the state claimed official science-based agricultural knowledge as superior to the vernacular knowledge of farmers. The newsletter of the KDA, which began in 1944, can be seen within this context as one means through which the KDA attempted to claim its role as both an advocate and a source of information for farmers, thereby seizing control over agricultural knowledge.

The sixty-plus year publication history of the KDA News raises classic rhetorical questions, such as who is the rhetor, what is the subject, and who is the intended audience? Although the rhetor is most obviously the generalized KDA (represented in the majority of articles, unattributed), there are additional rhetors with particular perspectives to offer, including the Commissioners of Agriculture (elected every four years, each with his own priorities; the Commissioner has thus far always been male), other members of the KDA staff, and guest columnists such as farm organization and government leaders; there are also occasional articles reprinted from other publications. The subject is primarily Kentucky agriculture, but because the Department is charged with a number of regulatory duties not wholly specific to agriculture (particularly in the areas of weights and measures), the subject is at times broader than agriculture proper. The subject of particular interest to me is of course tobacco, but I am also interested in the relationships between tobacco and other subjects and—as will become apparent—periods in which tobacco is absent.

The question of audience is complex, as suggested by my statement above about the (ir)relevance of the KDA News to farmers; as a government agency their audience is, in theory, all Kentuckians. According to Kenneth Burke, “[b]oth Aristotle and Cicero

consider audiences purely as something *given*. The extreme heterogeneity of modern life, however, combined with the nature of modern postal agencies, brings up another kind of possibility: the systematic attempt to *carve out* an audience” (Rhetoric of Motives 64.)

Through the newsletter, the KDA attempts to carve out an audience for the agency, particularly in the early period of increased state control of agriculture as the KDA attempted to persuade multiple constituencies, including farmers and non-farmers, to *identify*—to use Burke’s term—with the agency. Sometimes appeals to different audiences come in the form of separate articles, and at other times the same article employs different appeals for different audiences.

The KDA appeals to farmers most obviously through pedagogical rhetoric, through the provision of articles about such topics as variety trials, the testing of farming methods and mechanization, and advice for farm women.<sup>81</sup> Yet, farmers look not to the KDA for their pedagogical needs, but to the University of Kentucky Extension Service, to their farmer neighbors, and to commercial sources such as farm supply stores and seed and equipment companies (and, increasingly, such information is provided to them by tobacco companies). The pedagogical articles instead serve an ethos-building purpose, arguing that the KDA knows farmers and understands what is important to them and, perhaps even more importantly, the KDA has the authority to provide information to farmers. Other articles serve pedagogical purposes for non-farmers, instructing them about basic farming practices, for instance, while simultaneously seeking identification

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<sup>81</sup> Women are largely appealed to through a long-standing pedagogical column that included recipes, advice for the hostess, and household tips. This section went through a series of names over the years, including “For the Ladies,” “In the Home,” and “Kookin’ Korner” until it disappeared in the early 1970s. Since the female audience was so explicitly carved out through this space, we can presume that the rest of the newsletter was written with a male audience in mind.



with farmers by showing them that they know what farmers know. According to Burke, “Here is perhaps the simplest case of persuasion. You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (Rhetoric of Motives 55 *emphasis his*). Yet, such articles, relating information that farmers know well, also argue that farmer knowledge now belongs to the state, and the state has the power to dole it out.

Another important strategy of the KDA is the use of “ceremonial” or epideictic speech—despite the fact that a newsletter, as a publication, could hardly seem more mundane.<sup>82</sup> In considering the content of the KDA News in this framework, I will borrow from Gregory Clark’s application of Kenneth Burke’s ideas about “persuad[ing] people ‘to attitude’” before action (19). According to Clark, “The traditional purpose of epideictic speech is to display collective values as enacted in exemplary stories of praiseworthy people—and in their image those addressed are invited to make themselves over” (20). This is very much what goes on in the pages of the KDA News: the reader is asked to visualize him or herself in the story being told, in a celebration of “who we are” that has the purpose of persuading people to action toward “who we will be.” In this chapter, I am interested in understanding how the KDA’s presentation of “who we are” changes over the years, reflecting not only who KDA perceives as its audience, but who they want their audience to be and how they want their audience(s) to perceive Kentucky agriculture.

This analysis of the use of epideictic speech will also rely on the distinction made between “self-evident” and “self-conscious” as implied by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

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<sup>82</sup> Although not the topic of this chapter, the newsletter also provides examples of the other two types of classic rhetorical speech, judicial (persuading to the past) and political (persuading to the future).

in her discussion of self-evident Jewishness and the its opposite, self-conscious Jewishness, in her consideration of the Klezmer revival.<sup>83</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett examines the Klezmer revival as a “phenomenon [related] to what Haim Soloveitchik has called the end of self-evident Jewishness” (“Sounds” 50). Soloveitchik argued that the result of the end of self-evident Jewishness that began in the mid-1950s was Orthodoxy; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that heritage is another result, in this case a genre of “heritage music.” Rhetorically, self-conscious statements call attention to their production; self-evident statements rely on naturalized or assumed truths and conceal their production. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s discussion is useful because it shows how self-conscious and self-evident discourses are always interdependent. She demonstrates how “heritage” invents or points to prior, seemingly self-evident cultural practices. In other words, “authentic” practices are invented retrospectively. I will return to the implications for tobacco heritage in a later chapter; in this chapter, I will use the categories of “self-evident” and “self-conscious” to differentiate between two categories of coverage of tobacco production, each signifying a different attitude toward tobacco. I will point to distinctions between tobacco as a self-evident economic farming tradition—a tradition that was accepted as “part and parcel of a way of life” in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s words (52)—and tobacco as a self-conscious symbol of Kentucky agricultural life, heritage, and economic prosperity.

In my analysis of the KDA News, I will consider as “self-evident” those articles that report on ongoing activities that are routine aspects of tobacco culture and economy,

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<sup>83</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett borrows Soloveitchik’s concept of “self-evident” but she does not use the term “self-conscious.” For “self-conscious” and “self-evident” as terms signifying different relationships with particular traditions, I borrow from Amy Shuman’s use of these terms in conversation and classroom contexts.

and are reported in a manner that is similar to the reporting of other Kentucky farm products. However, as I will note, though many such articles appear to present tobacco as self-evident, they also, again, stake a claim on vernacular knowledge through the very presentation of this knowledge in print. I will consider as “self-conscious” those articles, and events written about in articles, that call attention to tobacco in terms of its importance as tradition and/or heritage; claims about its centrality in Kentucky life and culture; and celebrations of its role in the past and present. Self-conscious tobacco coverage differs vastly from the treatment of other commodities. For instance, market reports are a regular feature of the KDA News, and tobacco is reported on as just one of the many products produced on Kentucky farms; this is self-evident tobacco coverage. On the other hand, when tobacco—and no other commodity—is placed in a museum display for the first time, a self-consciousness about tobacco heritage becomes apparent.

I am not arguing that there was a specific “end” to self-evident tobacco culture; in fact, I will demonstrate that self-evident and self-conscious coverage of tobacco long existed side-by-side. Yet, self-consciousness about tobacco culture grew over time as a result of particular events and societal changes; I will lay the groundwork for this argument here and then explicate it more fully in Chapter 5. Tobacco was of course not fully “self-evident” at any point in the twentieth century, and certainly not by 1944 (as evidenced by the writers of Tatham and others, it may indeed not ever have been fully self-evident for Europeans). There was great self-consciousness about the crop, based in large part on the events that had taken place in the preceding decades—the Black Patch Wars; the rise, fall, and reorganization of tobacco co-ops; and the creation of the tobacco program. Such events made full self-evident status impossible. Yet, the self-

consciousness in the 1940s was about the economic value of the crop, not about the symbolic importance of tobacco as part of Kentucky's "heritage." That would come soon, however, hand in hand with a growing stigma based on the health effects of tobacco and the perception of a resulting threat to the tobacco way of life.

In what follows, I describe the coverage of tobacco in the newsletter of the KDA from its beginning in 1944 through April 2008. As it would not be possible to describe every article about tobacco during the 64-year period, I examine representative articles in order to understand general trends as well as shifts in the overall messages that the KDA presents about tobacco and the rhetorical strategies employed in getting these messages across. Coverage of tobacco in these newsletters is in part seasonal, as over the years there is more coverage of tobacco during the harvest and sales seasons and when there are events that take place that center on tobacco. Articles that appear in the spring are more likely to center on farm practices. The August through December issues of the KDA News, over time, generally have more tobacco-related content than spring and summer issues. This indicates that the focus is on harvest and sales rather than planting, which can most obviously be attributed to KDA's direct role as a regulatory agency in the marketing of tobacco. The KDA had the responsibility for such things as testing warehouse scales, ensuring warehouse regulatory compliance, and producing daily market reports; they also organized events such as the state fair. There are particular categories of articles that are recurrent, such as articles about technology and farm practices, coverage of the burley market outlook and the opening day of the marketing season, aspects of the KDA's regulatory role in the tobacco industry, and the exhibition of tobacco at the state fair.

The KDA News moves through several periods, each reflecting social perceptions of tobacco as well as economic and political events of the times, and the influence of individual commissioners; these periods provide the structure for this chapter. In the period of 1944 to the present, tobacco moved from an accepted and symbolically self-evident farm commodity that was highly valued despite the tumultuous nature of the industry, to one valorized and defended as essential to the Kentucky economy and later to Kentucky's heritage, to one that has been erased almost entirely from the pages of the KDA News even as it continues to contribute to the Kentucky farm economy.

### **World War II and the Cigarette**

The first issue of the KDA News in March of 1944 makes it clear that from the perspective of the Department of Agriculture, tobacco is an embraced commodity: "Increased home consumption, plus shipments overseas to our soldiers and allied countries, is bringing about a fairly rapid decrease in the total stocks of burley and flue cured tobaccos" (1). Here, the Commissioner of Agriculture applauds increased smoking rates in the U.S. and abroad and urges maximized per acre production in order to keep up with demand.<sup>84</sup> Both tobacco production and the prices that companies were paying to farmers were high during World War II, the period in which smoking rates increased the most in U.S. history (Wagner 74), as soldiers smoked cigarettes provided by the armed forces and came home addicted (Axton 116). In December 1944/January 1945, the

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<sup>84</sup> Although the KDA covers issues specific to dark-fired tobacco (the other type of tobacco grown in Kentucky) as well as burley, there is much more attention paid to burley because historically dark-fired tobacco accounted for only about 5-7% of Kentucky tobacco income (Snell "Burley and Dark Tobaccos"). In this analysis of the KDA newsletters I will only occasionally mention coverage of dark-fired, when it is relevant. However, in instances where I have counted the number of articles on tobacco or I discuss general trends in the coverage of tobacco I have included all types of tobacco in my analysis.

outlook for burley tobacco as reported in the KDA News was good, although there was a cigarette shortage in 1944 that merited a congressional investigation. According to the KDA, “Just who is too blame” “is difficult to determine” because the government had not released manufacturing and sales data (Jan. 1945, 1). In 1944, “domestic consumption of tobacco [was] at an all time high,” and military consumption was also high (January 1945). At this time, there was as yet no reason for the KDA to mask their desire to see tobacco consumption continue to rise; rising rates of smoking were simply good for the economic future of farmers, warehouses, tobacco companies, and the state.

Immediately following the war, prices dropped, and throughout the latter 1940s the KDA repeatedly advocated for various efforts to increase foreign markets for burley, including the establishment of a new burley marketing organization.<sup>85</sup> Huge crops were grown in 1945, in part due to the increased use of fertilizer and lime and other farm practices with a resulting increase in yields (February 1945:6), leading to a drop in prices in 1946 followed by debates over whether or not to lower quotas. This is the cyclical pattern that remained in place through the end of the program: growing demand led to higher prices and calls for farmers to grow more tobacco; farmers grew more and saw prices drop and quotas cut as pool stocks—tobacco not bought and therefore held on loan by the Burley Co-op until it was bought—grew. In January 1946, it was noted that “The recent slump of burley tobacco prices has caused grave concern among all Kentuckians

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<sup>85</sup> There have historically been differing opinions on the role and the usefulness of the Burley Growers Co-operative Association, because following the establishment of the federal tobacco program (specifically in 1941) the Co-op’s primary purpose became managing the pool stocks and therefore, many felt, did very little in terms of finding new markets. Since the end of the program the role of the Co-op has been increasingly questioned and has resulted in at least one unsuccessful lawsuit arguing that the Co-op should be disbanded and the assets (in the hundreds of millions) should be divided up among the members (defined as anyone with a financial interest in the growing of burley tobacco). The Co-op is currently working to recreate themselves as a cooperative marketing association, mostly through developing markets in China.

for this crop is more than any other the basis of Kentucky prosperity” (2), reflecting the importance of tobacco economically, but also, through the term “prosperity,” suggesting that the crop was responsible for a general well-being. Throughout this time, the KDA actively encouraged farmers to vote in favor of the continuation of the tobacco program in referendums held every three years. Often there would be a fairly straightforward news article on issues such as this in the newsletter, accompanied by an editorial addressed to farmers in the “Commissioner’s Corner.”

Examples of coverage that treated tobacco as a “self-evident” aspect of the agricultural economy at this point included cover photos of Future Farmers of America members selling tobacco along with other farm products they produced, coverage of the KDA carrying out their regulatory roles such as checking all tobacco warehouse scales prior to the start of the tobacco marketing season, notices about disease prevention and other farming practices, and articles about new technologies. In 1946, there was a piece entitled “Profit from Hens Surpasses Tobacco,” a story about one farmer who raised a large flock of hens and made a greater profit from them than from his four acres of tobacco. Here, and in similar articles included in the newsletter sporadically over the years, tobacco income is understood as a yardstick by which to measure other farm income, highlighting its status as the default crop.

The KDA also argued throughout this period that burley was in direct competition with flue-cured tobacco, which had a more solid overseas market and was used in larger quantities in American blend cigarettes. This blend took off with R.J. Reynolds’ Camels, and included about 50% flue-cured, 30% burley, 10% “Oriental” (Turkish) and about 2%

Maryland (April 1947:7).<sup>86</sup> In April 1947, the KDA praised American G.I.s for their “tremendous promotional job...They have distributed American cigarettes all over the world” (7) and argued for the need to convince other countries to use more burley in their cigarettes, as flu-cured has done. These comments about the role of the G.I.s in increasing the market for tobacco continue to reflect an unapologetic advocacy for an increased demand for burley worldwide.

In May 1947, there was discussion of farm practices that led to increased yields of burley and a comment that strong prices have encouraged a concentration on volume over quality—a comment that farmers make today and that I will return to in later chapters. In 1948, quota was cut by 10% and the pool stocks went down as hoped. The July issue was taken up almost entirely by an article about the inclusion of tobacco in the Marshall Plan for European Recovery.

Also in July 1948, there was a brief note that tobacco would once again be a part of the exhibits/competitions at the state fair, after a fifteen year absence. From this point forward, the rules of the tobacco exhibits and the names of the winners in each class were periodically included in the newsletter although the details on other exhibits are not. This suggests that KDA is claiming the authority to judge tobacco, through their official knowledge, in more pronounced ways than other farm products. The coverage of the state fair was sporadic over the years. It was most consistent from 1948 through 1953; in the years that follow, the coverage was there a year and then gone for three to five and then there for a year and so on. In 1949, the tobacco show at the state fair was very prominent, with articles in three issues, before and after (August, September, and

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<sup>86</sup> Prior to the introduction of the American blend, cigarettes were primarily either “Virginia” blend (all or mostly flu-cured) or “Turkish” blend (with about 40% Turkish tobacco).



October). In 1951, there were multiple articles—September, October, and November—and winners were listed for the tobacco exhibit but not for exhibits of any other farm products. The tobacco exhibit at the state fair was included in a total of eighteen years (often in multiple issues) out of the sixty-four years of the newsletter. Tobacco continues at the fair today, although it has not been commented on in the newsletter since a brief mention in 2001.

The November 1948 issue included a total of nine articles related to tobacco, ranging from articles about the tobacco program, to farm practices and photos of the Burley Co-op directors. Looking at the issues from the 1940s together, tobacco was written about in an average of over two-thirds of the issues each year, and was frequently covered on the first page (it was on page one in six out of twelve issues in 1946). Overall, tobacco coverage in the 1940s is fairly self-evident even as its role in the agricultural economy was highlighted above other commodities, but with the 50s a more self-consciously celebratory period began, as threats to tobacco steadily increased.

### **The 1950s: King Tobacco Reigns**

In 1950 and '51, the KDA News featured a five-part “pictorial serial” following the tobacco growing season, including photos of plant beds and plowing (May 1950), pulling plants and setting (July 1950), topping and cutting (September 1950), baskets packed at sale and auction (February 1951), and final weighing, packing into hogsheads, and processing at the redrying facility (March 1951). Most of these were inside the newsletter, but the final two were full front-page photo spreads; the auction piece covered the front page with four photos and a large block-lettered headline, “KING TOBACCO

REIGNS.” This pictorial serial, the first of multiple displays and series like it, evidences a shift in the perception of tobacco’s status; no other farm product was treated to such a series in over sixty years of the newsletter.

This serial also provides important clues about the KDA’s perceived audience because the captions accompanying the photos are in a teaching voice; the direct audience appears not to be imagined as farmers since they live by this information and do not need to be taught it, but to be those who do not know the very basic steps in tobacco production. At the same time, other articles in the newsletters (in this and in other issues) speak directly to the farmer through pronoun usage—using “you,” for instance, in articles about technology and farm practices, support for the tobacco program, etc. This and other examples suggest that this newsletter is directed at multiple audiences. Those articles that are intended to teach non-tobacco farmers about tobacco production serve multiple purposes, however, because in addition to educating the non-farmer, they provide the farmer with a point of identification with the KDA. By seeing the work that they do mirrored to them in the pages of the newsletter, farmers will—or so KDA hoped—see the Department (and the Commissioner) as their friend and advocate. In this sense, such features as the pictorial serial of tobacco work act as visual epideictic speech, celebrating tobacco work as part of the current *way of life* of Kentucky agriculture, a way of life that the KDA is persuading multiple audiences to understand and preserve. Like the publishing of the rules related to tobacco displays at the state fair, however, such serials also claim tobacco knowledge that once belonged to farmers as official knowledge that the KDA has the authority to control.

Another ongoing feature in the newsletter, photos of the opening day of the tobacco auction market, debuted in February of 1951. Such opening day photos became obligatory, often with the commissioner pictured in rows of tobacco under auction, along with the buyers, auctioneers, and warehousemen. These photos appeared in about half of the years of the newsletter (thirty out of sixty-three), with the last one appearing the year prior to the last auction season before the buyout, which ended the auction culture almost entirely. The photos served as a visual demonstration of the KDA's role in tobacco sales; the presence of the Commissioner and other officials in the photos further argued that tobacco sales (*the sale of YOUR tobacco*) are the Commissioner's priority.

In July 1953, there was a seemingly random note at the bottom of page two that reads, in its entirety: "Your Lieutenant Governor, Emerson 'Doc' Beauchamp, is not only a hard working servant of the Commonwealth, he is also a hard working farmer and tobacco grower. On a recent trip to Logan County he was roped in during tobacco resetting and has blisters to prove it" (2). This piece clearly serves the purpose of building ethos for the Lieutenant Governor as not only a quota owner (as most public officials of the time were) but a tobacco man who gets out and works in his tobacco.

Self-evident articles continued throughout the 50s, such as those about variety tests and plant bed preparation (March 1954), the testing of maleic hydrazide (August 1954; today a chemical used universally and known as "MH," "sucker control," or "sucker dope"), and farming practices to control nicotine content (March 1955). In 1954, the layout changed and a new masthead was introduced which included illustrations of farm products, with a large tobacco leaf at the center. While in general all the objects are out of proportion to one another (for instance, the ear of corn is as big as the head of the

horse and cow) the tobacco leaf is far out of proportion; it is the largest object and is pictured at the center. This masthead, a visual argument that tobacco is central to the farm economy, remained in use until 1969.

In March of 1955, the front-page headline read “Tobacco samples become museum pieces” below a full-page photo of a “permanent exhibit of samples of all types of tobacco grown in Kentucky in the museum of the Kentucky Historical Society in the Old State Capitol Building” (6). According to the accompanying article, “Farmers, school children, tourists and the passerby will now have the opportunity to see for themselves exactly what each grade of tobacco leaves should look like,” and “This display will be of particular value to tobacco growers as it will provide them with a guide for sorting their own tobacco” (6). A “guide for sorting their own tobacco” seems like an odd purpose for the exhibit, since tobacco farmers see grading their tobacco as a skill learned in the family stripping room beginning as soon as they are old enough to start removing tips.<sup>87</sup> It is doubtful that farmers were going to learn to grade their crop on a trip to the state museum, and yet this display provides another example of the KDA’s claim on what was formerly vernacular knowledge. The act of displaying tobacco in the state museum also makes a significant statement of self-consciousness about the importance of tobacco to Kentucky. Placement in a state museum rather than another public site suggests an implicit perception of tobacco “heritage” although this term will not be used in the newsletter for several years to come. Most interestingly, this took place as tobacco’s

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<sup>87</sup>Tobacco companies do provide guidance for the grades that they want tobacco stripped into; Philip Morris today provides posters with pictures of the grades as they want them, with the title “Burley Separation Guide.”

critics were beginning to make their voices heard ever-louder—also not yet explicitly named in the newsletter.

In April of 1955, the front page featured a letter to tobacco growers from Commissioner Adams in which he warned of the “grave danger” that the state would be in if growers did not vote in favor of continuing the support price for the next three years. He argued, “No other enterprise in our State has as great an influence on the entire economy of Kentucky as the tobacco industry. Naturally, whenever the well-being of the tobacco industry is in jeopardy it is a matter of concern to everyone.” It was during this period that the economic rhetoric began to intensify, as the economic importance of tobacco to not only growers but the entire state became a central argument in defense of the crop. This economic rhetoric was front and center in September 1955, through a full-page cover photo of a field of tobacco and a tobacco barn with the caption, “Kentucky’s most profitable tradition.” In this period a shift to a defensive posture was made, through increasing arguments about the economic importance of tobacco. Although not directly mentioned, this shift coincided with rising attention to medical evidence about the effects of smoking beginning in the early to mid 50s, particularly with a report released by the American Cancer Society to the American Medical Association in 1954 (Wagner 78) and a series of articles published in Reader’s Digest in the 50s and the 60s, beginning with a 1950 article, “How Harmful are Cigarettes?” (Riis). Although these anti-smoking campaigns were never mentioned in the KDA News, I believe that they motivated an increased self-consciousness about tobacco, as the entire tobacco industry began to feel that it was under attack. Rather than attempting to answer critics directly (as they later would), the KDA deployed an economic defense.

In May of 1956, the assistant agriculture commissioner testified before a “Senate sub-committee hearing on the use of tobacco synthetics in cigarette making,” arguing that smoking rates would decrease if the companies continued to move away from a focus on tobacco quality in their advertising (7). During this time, manufacturers began using techniques that reduced the amount of tobacco in cigarettes, and the techniques are described here. Obviously, this was bad news for farmers because it meant less tobacco was needed, and the assistant commissioner tried to argue that it would be bad for the industry as a whole. Just as they had a decade earlier, the KDA was unapologetically advocating that the more smokers there are the better off Kentucky would be.

The text of the assistant commissioner’s testimony before the Senate subcommittee was reprinted, and in it he mentioned the “dependence of Kentucky agriculture on tobacco,” as well as a historical note that “[s]oon after John Rolfe began commercial culture of tobacco at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1612, quality became essential” (7). He went on to note the importance of tobacco to everyone, “[s]ince tobacco has long been considered a favorable commodity to tax by the Federal and State Governments” (7). These are first instances of discursive themes of the historical significance of tobacco and the economic benefits to *all*, themes to which I will return. He also notes,

Burley tobacco growers have just completed one of the most confusing market seasons in history. After years of efforts to achieve quality desired by smokers, our growers have found that certain lower grades of Burley have been much in demand. Such trends have caused the grade-price relationship to seemingly be overhauled without satisfactory information to make the necessary adjustments along the line of production and marketing. (7)

This suggests that the confusion about pricing expressed by today's farmers (and noted, below, by a more recent commissioner) is far from new. This is also one of only a handful of times that the companies are criticized in the pages of the KDA News; more often, company officials appear in pictures with commissioners and KDA board members, and their campaigns and activities—such as funding research and events—are reported on with praise.

The coverage of tobacco dropped as the 1950s progressed; each year, excluding 1954 and 1955, there were articles on tobacco in half or fewer of the 12 issues. The interests and opinions of the Commissioners of Agriculture clearly affected the amount of tobacco coverage, and the drop in coverage in the late 50s may be traceable at least in part to Commissioner Butler, who came into the office in December 1955; with the exception of a photo of him with the tobacco exhibit in the Old Capitol in March of 1958, the slim tobacco coverage is mostly limited to self-evident aspects such as market reports (which are obligatory throughout the entire 60 year period until the early 2000s) and a couple instances of warehousemen charged for faulty scales. In 1959, there was a photo of Beauchamp—the former Lt. Governor mentioned earlier, who was now the incoming Commissioner of Agriculture—“examin[ing] some bulks of tobacco grown on his farm” (December 1959, 2). His professional experience was listed above the photo; however, his status as a tobacco man was clearly the most important aspect of his resume. The tobacco coverage increased during his term.

### **King Tobacco Threatened, the Queens Reign**

Coverage of tobacco princess and queen pageants began in 1960 (as does coverage of the Dairy Princess a few months earlier) with a photo from the International Tobacco Queen Contest in Raleigh, North Carolina, of “[t]wenty girls from six tobacco states and three foreign countries,” including three Kentuckians (November 1960, 4). Coverage of tobacco-related beauty pageants swelled over the next decade, as I will discuss, and then faded. Sporadic coverage of a range of other commodity-inspired titles is present during this period as well.

In December 1960, the photos of the opening of the marketing season returned after a four-year absence, with two front-page photos and the caption, “Scenes such as the one above are being repeated dozens of times daily as the most important event of the year, the tobacco marketing season, occurs in Kentucky again” (1). This caption marked the opening day as “important” through its many perpetuations and yet normal because it was happening “daily.” Beginning with these photos, coverage of the opening of the markets, often featured on the front page, became a much more consistent component of the newsletter.

The February 1961 issue includes a photograph of the Kentucky float in the Kennedy inaugural parade accompanied by this caption,

Tobacco, Kentucky’s most important crop, was combined with some of the State’s other fine traditions to carry out a theme of “Peace” for the Commonwealth’s float in the Kennedy Inaugural Parade in Washington, January 20. The float displayed a giant peace pipe and some burley tobacco, naturally, to smoke in it. In addition, the float was replete with lovely girls, a Kentucky Colonel and his lady and a replica of My Old Kentucky Home. The horses, of course, represented Kentucky’s thorobred industry. The float was carpeted with a facsimile of our Blue Grass [...] (4)



The float displayed symbols of Kentucky's identity, including its most well-known agricultural products: tobacco, thoroughbred horses, and bluegrass.<sup>88</sup> Although there was no attempt to hide tobacco's use as a substance that is smoked, the inclusion of a "peace pipe" rather than a cigarette suggests that reminders of the historical uses of tobacco may have been safer than the increasingly criticized cigarette.

Tobacco coverage was prominent in the fall of 1961, with the exhibits at the fair featured in August, the Tobacco Princess in October, and the Carrollton Burley Festival in November; these represent the first time that either the state tobacco princess or a tobacco festival was mentioned. Also in November, an article described the growing demand for burley, the possibility that quotas would go up 23%, and that KDA had hired a tobacco marketing specialist. In December, the state fair was again highlighted, along with photos from the opening of the auction.

In July of 1962, there was a front-page article about the search for a "Young Lady To Be State Tobacco Princess"; qualifications included being "beautiful in the tradition of Kentucky women" (1). The article went on to note that "[t]his Department is cooperating in this project because Commissioner Beauchamp believes that it provides an opportunity for the promotion of the tobacco industry at a time when the industry is beset by health scares and foreign market complications" (3). This was the first time that "health scares" were directly acknowledged in these pages, and it is clear that the Tobacco Princess and Queen of Tobaccoland are charged with serving as "ambassadors" for the industry (as they are later called). This article ends with a note that state funds

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<sup>88</sup> Missing from the float is one of today's prominent symbols of the Commonwealth, bourbon whiskey, which was also produced since the colonial days of the territory. This is interesting because, as I discuss in the next chapter, there is a perception that tobacco and alcohol have switched places in terms of acceptance and stigma.

were not being used for the pageant; instead, tobacco organizations such as the Burley Co-op would pay for it, although the Department of Agriculture coordinated it. This statement combined with the statement quoted above implied both a defensive posture and a level of concession to critics. Clearly the “health scares” were beginning to have an impact by 1962.

The tobacco princess coverage continued to increase in 1963, with articles in April, July, August, and September. By now the state pageant had become a mainstay, with the state Tobacco Princess going on to compete in the national pageant for the title of “Queen of Tobaccoland.” Photos of the young queens and princesses with the commissioner, company representatives, and other older white men become more frequent, as do occasional photos of the women with their prizes (sets of luggage were common). Women had become ambassadors for this historically male-centered industry; their young and healthy bodies were used to combat the increasing “scares” about the effects of smoking on the body.<sup>89</sup>

Coverage of tobacco increased and changed in tone upon the release of the Surgeon General’s report in January 1964. The front page of the February 1964 issue included an article celebrating the centennial year of burley (when the current type of burley, “white burley,” was discovered on a Bracken County farm) along with excerpts from the commissioner’s testimony to a House Tobacco Subcommittee about the need for additional tobacco research. With his statement that “the tobacco business is at a crisis,” the explicit *crisis/tobacco under attack* rhetoric that would continue into the 1980s began (1-2). The crisis referred to by the Commissioner is of course the Surgeon General’s

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<sup>89</sup> See B. Roberts for an examination of 1930s tobacco queens.

report, and he offered a mantra of defense that I will discuss in a later chapter, in which all the things that tobacco has paid for are listed in a rhythmic chant:

In my state, tobacco prices set real estate values; bring good times, or bad, for our economy; furnish additional money to go to Detroit for autos, trucks and tractors; permit homes to be modernized; and often times make a college education possible for deserving young men and women. (2)

A line along the bottom of the front page reads: “1964—BURLEY TOBACCO’S CENTENNIAL YEAR,” referencing the discovery of White Burley described in Chapter 1. This line runs across at least one page of every newsletter in 1964 beginning with this February issue, suggesting the KDA had begun to employ a rhetoric of heritage to speak back to the health-based critics of tobacco—although heritage was so far only implied, and the word “heritage” was still not yet in use.

In March, there’s an article that speaks directly back to the Surgeon General’s report, in which the commissioner warned of the possible economic crisis that may result from “a campaign against tobacco” and pointed out “the magnitude of the anti-tobacco attacks now under way.” “We must vigorously defend our tobacco industry against these attacks,” according to the Commissioner (2). He noted that the Surgeon General recommended further study in the report and expressed agreement, stating, “It is to the interest of all concerned that no verdict be returned until the question has been resolved by scientific means” (2). This same issue of the newsletter included an announcement that the KDA would once again be coordinating the tobacco princess contest; the contest was on the front page of the June and October issues, and it was also featured in the August issue.

The economic defense of tobacco was revisited in February 1965, with an article reprinted from a North Carolina publication in which the “Path of a Tobacco Dollar [is] Traced” from the pocket of the farmer throughout the community, as it changed hands ten times (4). Tobacco princesses and queens again reigned in 1965, with a front page article in June announcing that the state winner would receive a scholarship and a follow-up article in August; the contest was held at the state fair in this year. In both the September and October issues the winner was featured on the front page. In November, the Shelbyville tobacco festival queen was featured on the front page, and in November Kentucky’s Tobacco Princess was pictured at the National Tobacco Festival with Eva Gabor, where the princesses were presented with silver cigarette lighters.

In 1967 the tobacco pageant reached a new height, as the Kentucky Tobacco Princess became the “Burley Belle,” and a four-day festival and conference were planned around the pageant in August. The festival was announced in March and in explaining the name change the KDA noted that the decision was made that because sponsorship of the event had been in the hands of burley organizations, “the annual activity [should] be identified specifically as a burley promotion activity” (1). The schedule of events was announced on the front page in May 1967, along with an announcement of plans to televise the final portion of the pageant; in July, the newsletter announced that congressmen from burley states planned to attend the conference and festival. The pairing of the Burley Belle pageant with this conference confirms that it was no accident that the height of the burley pageant era coincided with the period of the most direct responses by KDA to the critics of tobacco’s impact on health.

In August, the newly crowned Kentucky Burley Belle was pictured with the commissioner on the front page, along with her biography and a summary of the pageant. Another front-page article led with the headline, “Conference Airs Problems Facing Burley Industry” in which the major topic of discussion at the conference attached to the burley festival was characterized as, “The so-called ‘health problem’ and the attack on the industry resulting from the surgeon-general’s report calling tobacco injurious to health” (1). Kentucky Governor Ned Breathitt was quoted as saying, in regard to an apparent call for a ban on smoking, that just as taking away food is not the solution to obesity, prohibition is not the answer to questions about smoking and health. According to Breathitt, “It is obvious that many people desire tobacco and get satisfaction from the use of it. It is up to research to help find the answers so that this centuries-old custom can continue to please those who want to use tobacco” (2). Here and occasionally elsewhere not only was tobacco farming defended as a tradition, but so was smoking. “Research” is called upon to validate and perhaps recover both traditions; there is not yet an attempt to discursively separate tobacco-the-crop from tobacco products.

In October 1967, the front page included an announcement that Kentucky’s Burley Belle had been crowned Queen of Tobaccoland: “Along with the title, she received a \$2,000 college scholarship and the honor of being the goodwill ambassador for the Nation’s tobacco industry” (1). Above the photo and caption was an article, “Tobacco And Health Chief Topic At Meeting of Burley & Dark Dealers” (1), which described a discussion that took place at the conference about the “constant attacks the industry is undergoing from health organizations” (2). The November 1967 issue included the partial text of a speech given by the head of the Council for Tobacco

Research, in which he argued that a *correlation* between smoking and illness is not the same as *cause*.<sup>90</sup>

The Burley Festival and Burley Belle pageant took place again in 1968 with articles in March, July, August, September, October, and November, although there was no mention of a concurrent conference. And in February 1968, the Burley Belle was pictured on Kentucky's float in the inaugural parade in Washington, D.C., where she "rode on the Kentucky float along with other representatives of Kentucky tradition not the least of which was a replica of My Old Kentucky Home" (2).

Farming practices such as tobacco stripping techniques, variety selection, and new technologies continued to appear throughout this time as well, as self-evident aspects of tobacco production, as well as further examples of the KDA's efforts to claim authority over tobacco knowledge. In the 60s, farmers were raising more and more tobacco and barn space was becoming a problem. KDA's regulatory role was consistently covered in the 1960s—the testing of warehouse scales, dates and guidelines for marketing season openings, daily market reports during the sales season, and the referendum to continue the program, voted on every three years. But, the most interesting trend of the 1960s was the swell of tobacco coverage beginning after the Surgeon General's report. Tobacco coverage increased from about half the issues each year to coverage in every issue in 1967 and tobacco appeared on the front page of the newsletter increasingly throughout the 1960s; discourses I have labeled as implicitly heritage-based also increased in the 1960s, and photos of the opening day of tobacco markets, which appeared only in three

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<sup>90</sup> The Council for Tobacco Research was established in 1954 (as the Tobacco Industry Research Committee), funded by a coalition of manufacturers to conduct their own scientific research on the effects of tobacco use and to communicate the results of this research to the public (Wagner 79-80).

years during the 1950s, appeared every year but one in the 1960s (1963, the year before the report).

### **The 1970s and 1980s: Tobacco Under Attack, Hello “Heritage”**

The 1970s started out with solid tobacco coverage resembling that of the 1960s. The December 1970 issue included a full-page spread on a tobacco harvester that was being tested, an indication that labor was once again a problem. The cover of the 1969 Kentucky Agricultural Statistics and Annual Report (advertised in the KDA News in August 1970) was a field of tobacco, emphasizing the central place of tobacco in Kentucky agriculture; comparatively, a horse farm appeared in 2007. In October 1970, the KDA announced that “Talent will not be a factor” in the 1970 Burley Belle pageant. Instead, the contestants would be judged on their recitation of an essay that they were each to write on the topic “What Burley Tobacco Means to Kentucky.” According to this article, the competition was “designed as a means of encouraging general interest in the importance of burley tobacco as the major cash crop in Kentucky” (1). Clearly, a beauty pageant continued to draw interest, and the Belle’s role as the “goodwill ambassador for the industry” seems sharpened with the replacement of the talent contest.

The November 1970 issue, in addition to coverage of the Burley Belle pageant, included the first of a two-part series (the second in December) focused on the early history of tobacco in Kentucky at Boonesborough, which was settled in the late eighteenth century. This two-part series seems to have been another way of answering the question posed to the Burley Belle contestants, and together the Belles’ essays and the historical piece represent the beginning of a move from direct responses to tobacco health

critics to the deployment of the celebration of heritage as a line of defense, a shift that continued to grow and become more explicit throughout the 1970s.

In 1971, the Council on Burley Tobacco was officially formed as an outgrowth of a committee that met throughout the 1970s to deal with marketing issues posed by the continuing period of over-supply, with the explicit goal of saving the tobacco program. The April issue includes a large box that simply contains the message that “Burley Means \$\$\$...” Functionally, this filled an empty space for the graphic designer, perhaps, but it also served to remind readers of the economic impact of tobacco in the midst of attacks. Another focus in this issue was a grower referendum, coming up in May, about the move from acreage to poundage. Growers were to be given the choice to vote for the change or to lose the program altogether.<sup>91</sup>

In the early 1970s, direct references to the Surgeon General’s report dwindled from few to none, and articles about tobacco pageants and the state fair tobacco exhibits disappeared; however, the obligatory photo of the opening of markets continued. Articles that expressed pride in tobacco were on the rise, and “heritage” entered the lexicon—not just heritage implied, but the use of the term—joining the economic rhetoric. In the 1960s, the KDA was talking directly back to the Surgeon General’s report and questions regarding health. In contrast, by the late 1970s, the health issues were ever-present but not always directly acknowledged or addressed (although the argument that more research into the health effects of smoking was needed continued to be made). There was

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<sup>91</sup> The first attempt to change the burley tobacco program from allotments based on acreage to allotments based on poundage took place in 1966, but the grower referendum failed. The reason for the attempt to move to a poundage system was the oversupply of burley, in part due to the increase in per-acre yields. By moving to a poundage system, the argument went, the program could more accurately control the amount of tobacco produced.



a turn to language of “attacks” on tobacco coming not just from health arenas but from the more generalized “anti-tobacco” forces, with a particular focus on calls for increases on tobacco excise taxes. The word “attack” was used more and more frequently beginning about 1976.

In 1971, five issues of the newsletter had no articles on tobacco, but the other seven issues included tobacco articles on the front page. There were no burley pageants mentioned in 1971. In November 1972, there was a photo of a KDA staff member who represented Kentucky in the Queen of Tobaccoland contest but no other mention of pageants. It is unclear whether the Burley Belle pageant ceased or if KDA ended their involvement with and/or their coverage of it. Either way, it appears that KDA decided that the pageants weren’t accomplishing their goals. In May 1974, there was a piece on “Miss Tri-State Tobacco” who was crowned at the Tri-State Tobacco Festival (Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky); this was the last tobacco pageant mentioned in the newsletters, although other pageants such as those of dairy princesses and pork queens continued into the 80s.

In November 1972, there was a full page article on the history of the Burley Co-op, and in December 1972, the standard report on the tobacco auction market was expanded to include a series of photos and a description of the process from barn to warehouse that was clearly aimed at a non-burley audience, with the headline “Burley Payday.” Interestingly, in 1974 there were seven issues of the newsletter that contained no tobacco articles, tobacco didn’t appear on the cover a single time, and there were no obligatory articles on the opening of the markets, scales being checked, the burley outlook, or the state fair tobacco exhibits.

In August 1974, however, the KDA reported on a “Burley heritage print” issued by the Council on Burley Tobacco, marking the first instance I was able to document of the use of the word “heritage” in connection with tobacco in the newsletter. Although formed to deal with issues of overproduction of burley, the Council’s role quickly became one of marketing burley to both companies and the general public, in the new era of tobacco stigma. The print was called “Burley Tobacco – The Golden Leaf,” and it was intended as “a symbolic representation, in the art form, of the burley farming industry’s heritage and importance as an economic generator” (6).<sup>92</sup> This depiction of a tobacco field and barn was “developed because there was relatively little art available that was symbolic of the heritage of the burley tobacco industry and its far-reaching effects.” The role of the Council was summed up in the article to include “enhancing respect for the farmers who produce [burley] and their contributions to the economy.” Here, not only do heritage and economic relevance become tied together, but the perceived need to “enhance respect” for tobacco farmers implies that the stigma of tobacco was spreading to include farmers.

Tobacco coverage increased again in 1975, with only two issues lacking attention to it; article topics included quotas and the auction system, new tobacco baling machines being tested by the University of Kentucky (February), and a man who continued the “disappearing art of hand-splitting tobacco sticks” (August). In December 1975, the former Commissioner Beauchamp made his final appearance, as the photograph of him with his tobacco appeared again, this time with an article about his death and an announcement of a scholarship in his name.

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<sup>92</sup> Tobacco has of course long been referred to as “the golden leaf” because of the income it generated for farmers and manufacturers.

Beginning in 1976, the economic rhetoric was heightened as foreign tobacco production became an increasing threat to American growers. In January, the commissioner sided with farmers in a fight that would long continue (and continues today, however quietly): the demand for an accurate accounting of foreign imports based on the types of tobacco American companies purchased. He argued, “Here in Kentucky, burley tobacco is, as we all know, the economic mainstay of our farmers”; “...growers want a tariff on imported burley that will protect their interests” (2). On another front, in April, Senator Wendell Ford—who became a renowned tobacco advocate from 1974-1999—entered the fray when he testified against a proposal to increase the federal cigarette tax to fifty cents a pack, focusing his testimony on the economic importance of tobacco, arguing that taxing it was really an underhanded attempt to “kill the tobacco industry” (6). This argument against increased taxes became increasingly central, reaching new heights during the Clinton administration. Ford argued against taxing products that *might* be harmful, reflecting continued reluctance to accept the health effects of tobacco use. Also in this issue, there was an article by a representative of the Council on Burley Tobacco, who pointed out that “a dollar received for tobacco, and other farm products, multiplies five times in economic patterns before it fades away” and that “[s]ince earliest settlement, tobacco has been an economic mainstay” in the eight-state burley belt (6). The declaration that tobacco income multiplies five times became recurrent at this point, indicating not only the importance of tobacco to the Kentucky economy, but a rhetorical move to tie tobacco and community together. This, combined with references to tobacco history, created an argument for tobacco’s economic heritage at the local level.

The tobacco exhibit at the state fair returns in September 1976, including “a model of the Liberty Bell made entirely of tobacco” (4), a fitting representation of tobacco in the bicentennial year.<sup>93</sup> In November 1976, the commissioner, too, used the occasion of the American bicentennial to frame an economic heritage argument. He wrote:

Tobacco has had a powerful influence, since the earliest days of Kentucky’s settlement, in shaping the economic and social life of our Bluegrass State. The realization of tobacco as a salable agricultural product was an important factor in permanently locating settlers in our rich soil, in building new roads, and in establishing new towns and centers of economic activity. Its potential as a commercial crop lead to the ‘new West’s’ first export trade and the introduction of Kentucky to all continents of the world. (2)

Here, the economic defense is explicitly tied to “social life” and history, marking a further move to self-consciousness about not only tobacco’s economic importance but tobacco as responsible for a “way of life.” He discussed the amount of money that tobacco was expected to generate that year, gave the “multiplies five times” scenario, and concluded, “Whether or not we as individuals use tobacco products, we all live better in Kentucky because of tobacco” (2). This last argument came into increased usage at this time—the idea that some people choose to use tobacco products and some do not; that there is a freedom to smoke; and that despite personal choices, the economic benefits are enjoyed by all.

The Commissioner returned to the topic of tobacco’s economic importance in September 1977, with similar arguments: the turnover of the tobacco dollar; “attacks” on

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<sup>93</sup> Although the article does not mention the origin of the bell, R.J. Reynolds presented a “250-pound replica of the Liberty Bell constructed of pressed tobacco leaves” to the Smithsonian in celebration of the American bicentennial (Murrell 9); this replica or at least the idea for it may therefore have come from Reynolds.

tobacco, particularly false accusations that tobacco is supported by tax payers (in a common misunderstanding of the tobacco program as a “subsidy”); tobacco makes money for both farmers and taxpayers; and experts are not in agreement that tobacco is harmful. More and more frequently, the KDA can be seen responding to accusations that tobacco was subsidized by tax payer money—the economic-based arguments for tobacco’s importance get more and more important as economic *attacks* against tobacco increase. Eventually (1982), the federal “no-net-cost” legislation passed, ensuring that the tobacco program was paid for entirely by the industry (through fees paid by farmers, warehousemen, and companies), although the idea that tax dollars subsidized the industry remained in the minds of many through the buyout.<sup>94</sup>

In June of 1978, “Ford testifie[d] to save menaced tobacco industry,” again regarding proposed tax increases. He argued that the industry was making the changes that “smoking adversaries talk so much about” including lowering tar and nicotine levels (which had been cut in half), and so it was “ironic” that this “renewal of governmental assault on tobacco” would take place now (1). According to the KDA, people in the industry saw this as “The strongest attack on tobacco since 1964” (1). Although the KDA’s use of “tobacco industry” seems to raise questions about where their allegiances lay—with farmers or manufacturers—the “tobacco industry” is widely understood to discursively include farmers. The interests of tobacco farmers and manufacturers are obviously intrinsically linked, a fact which the manufacturers increasingly used to their own advantage during this period as they held up farmers as the victims of the attacks on

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<sup>94</sup> The buyout was also misunderstood by many to be payments made to farmers with tax payer monies, rather than tobacco company money.

tobacco and relied on farmers as grassroots lobbyists, and the KDA supported them in such efforts.

In October 1978, the report on the market was once again used as a time to educate readers about the economic importance of tobacco, as well as its importance to family farms—at this time it provided half of farm income from crops and a third of total farm income. In November of 1978, the “attack” and crisis rhetoric heightened once again, with another article about Ford testifying, this time regarding “various aspects of the effects of cigarettes on health,” particularly youth smoking (1). The KDA turned the language of health advocates on its head in stating that “anti-smoking legislation may be unhealthful to Kentucky’s economy” (a strategy used by anti-smoking advocates in later years, speaking for instance of Kentucky’s “economic addiction” to tobacco). Regarding the attacks on tobacco, the commissioner was quoted as saying at a public forum held by Ford, “When I hear talk of reducing or curtailing our tobacco farmers’ opportunities...my immediate response is to say that this is catastrophic action” (1). From this point forward rhetoric of the threat to tobacco *as a crop*, and to farmers of the crop, becomes increasingly common as the fear that this commodity may be altogether lost was expressed more and more.

The Commissioner’s message in this issue was focused on R.J. Reynolds’ “Pride in Tobacco” campaign, which he used as an entry into another discussion of tobacco’s economic importance to Kentucky, again pairing heritage and economy: “Let’s not lose sight of just how important this great crop and the people who grow, buy and process it really are to the heritage and economy of our commonwealth” (2). He then spoke of the “individual freedom” to smoke and the “harassment” that smokers faced and concluded,

“I call upon all Kentuckians who farm, sell, transport or process our crop to fight to retain tobacco as a viable product of our agriculture community. Kentucky needs tobacco and tobacco needs the support of all Kentuckians” (2). Increasingly, the language of the commissioner and others becomes masculine aggressive, focused on the “attacks” on tobacco and the need to “fight” the anti-tobacco forces.

There was also a separate article on the R.J.R. Pride in Tobacco campaign, described as “an information program designed to unite the tobacco community to support the region’s most important agricultural commodity,” which was “prompted by increasing anti-tobacco pressure” and “critics [who] have been free with words and loose with facts” (3). Materials “outlin[ing] the tobacco industry’s side of the public smoking situation, tobacco’s impact on the economy, current smoking and health facts, and the tax burden on tobacco” (3) were to be distributed through tobacco warehouses. The symbol of this campaign, a cartoon-like hand in the “thumbs up” position overlaid by a tobacco leaf under the heading “Pride in Tobacco,” was printed on banners, posters, cigarette lighters, and other items. “Pride” symbolizes not only an attempt to recover the stigmatized crop, but is also an emic term that farmers use to refer to a mastery of cultural practices; through the use of it R.J.R. is reminding farmers of the need for quality tobacco despite changing cultural practices and the growing stigma. The Deputy Commissioner of Agriculture “added that tobacco is still largely a family farm operation, and that many of these farms would cease to exist without the tobacco industry.” Here, the alignment of KDA and the tobacco companies was apparent yet again, as an emotional appeal to the plight of farmers was used in the defense of the industry.

The Farm Bureau has a column in this issue (a fairly regular feature during this period) about tobacco's economic importance. "Kentucky farmers would have to produce an additional three million-plus acres of grain crops to make up for the income lost if tobacco production were eliminated," according to the president of the Kentucky Farm Bureau, who argued that the "notion that alternative forms of agricultural production can magically take up the slack if tobacco is eliminated is absurd, factless fantasy" (6). He offered the following comparisons to demonstrate the economic importance of tobacco to Kentucky, as well, I would argue, as the symbolic importance: tobacco is "what the stock market is to Wall Street, autos to Detroit, and tourists to Florida. Take away tobacco, and you've taken away Kentucky's economic soul" (6).

In July of 1979, the cover story pertained to a new Kentucky agricultural products label developed by the Governor's Council on Agriculture. The article began, "Most people associate the label 'Kentucky' with a wide variety of commodities, including Thoroughbred horses, burley tobacco and bourbon whiskey. Now, the state's sellers and manufacturers of agricultural products have a 'Kentucky Connection,' a connection linking their products with a distinctive, standardized market" (1). This seal was to be used on food products made in Kentucky such as honey, eggs, and country ham; not, so the implication goes, on tobacco, horses, or bourbon. This new made-in-Kentucky seal was the first specific attempt described in the newsletter to create new agricultural associations with "Kentucky," and it is the only time that new associations were explicitly contrasted with tobacco, bourbon, and horses. As ongoing attempts to create new associations were launched, the contrasts are insinuated but not remarked upon in this comparative manner.



In 1979 and 1980, the articles that had come to be standards appeared: opening day of the markets; farming practices and technology; the burley outlook (the pool has no reserves for the first time ever, which should make for a good year for farmers); and a guest article from the Burley Co-op that reminded tobacco growers to vote for the program in the upcoming referendum. The Co-op argued that the vote was particularly important for several reasons including, “Anti-tobacco forces in each of the last three years have stepped up legislative efforts to end government loans for tobacco supports” (January 1980, 4). In the past, this argument would have been made by the commissioner in his column. However, Commissioner Barkley, who came into office in 1980, had a markedly different tone from his predecessor; Barkley was much more low-key, did not use “attack” rhetoric as much and did not put forth opinions on issues as often. Instead, he left these arguments for guest columnists. For instance, in August 1981 the commissioner presented the arguments around baling versus sheeting tobacco (an extremely controversial issue at the time), but did not give his own opinion as past commissioners did on tobacco issues. Barkley’s influence was perhaps the reason that in the early 1980s tobacco coverage dropped to include mostly obligatory articles only. Increasingly, the pieces that continued the passionate defense of tobacco were offered not by the KDA directly, but by guest columnists such as Senator Ford or representatives of farm organizations. This suggests the beginning of a political realignment for Commissioners, as the direct defense of tobacco became politically risky.

In January 1982, there was a full-page pictorial on tobacco under the title “‘Bacca’s in Case,” which included photographs of cutting tobacco, tobacco growing in the fields, and a tobacco warehouse. The accompanying caption once again described

tobacco production for a non-tobacco grower audience. The photo of tobacco cutting was taken at a cutting contest in Woodford County, marking the first mention of such a contest, followed by an August 1982 article about a tobacco festival and cutting contest in Georgetown. “The real purpose of the festival is to celebrate the importance of tobacco to Kentucky,” according to the organizer (5). The November 1982 marketing update once again included the mantra of tobacco’s economic importance, but also included tips about how to avoid tobacco theft, which suggests that KDA was continuing to speak to dual audiences.

July 1984 was perhaps the first time the KDA News acknowledged evidence that tobacco use is harmful, in an article about the need for research into alternative uses for tobacco. It was “becoming a less profitable crop,” and “there seems to be ‘a substantial block of evidence that smoking is harmful to some people’ the Commissioner said” (1). This new commissioner continued in a tone similar to his predecessor. He encouraged alternative crops “for those farmers who no longer find it profitable to grow tobacco” (3) and assured readers that the KDA will be working to guarantee markets for these new crops. These statements by the commissioner signal a resignation that the stigma of tobacco was here to stay, and that the economic future of Kentucky agriculture lies elsewhere; this shift in coverage continues, as alternative crops increasingly became the focus of the KDA.

Not everyone fully cedes to tobacco stigma. In October 1984, Philip Morris unveiled “artist Toss Chandler’s accurate and moving portrayal of the month-by-month life of the Kentucky burley farmer,” an exhibit entitled “Twelve Months of Tobacco” (4). This exhibit of twelve oil paintings was first displayed in the Halls of Congress and later

traveled around Kentucky, according to future issues of the KDA News. According to Kentucky Senator Walter “Dee” Huddleston, the exhibit demonstrates

...the significance of tobacco companies such as Philip Morris, to Kentucky and the entire nation. Philip Morris has been among the most civic-minded corporate citizens of Kentucky. The exhibit is just another step in that tradition. The exhibit also moves us to pay tribute to the thousands of hard working tobacco farmers—most of them small farmers in the purest sense of the word—who, down through the years, have provided so much to the country, the economy and the well-being of Kentucky. (4)

The subjects of each of the twelve paintings were not listed, but two can be seen in the background of the photo of the artist with Senators Huddleston and Ford and a Philip Morris executive, and one appears to picture a stripping room and the other a tobacco field and barn. Despite the fact that Senator Huddleston first listed Philip Morris’ significance and then the farmers’, in describing the purpose of the paintings, Philip Morris is not the subject of these paintings—farmers are, since, according to the article, the paintings are an “accurate and moving portrayal of the month-by-month life of the Kentucky burley farmer.”<sup>95</sup> Here, not only are the alliances of the KDA with the tobacco manufacturers on display, but so too are those of these two Kentucky senators. This exhibit is similar to the R.J. Reynolds campaign in that it too represents the deployment of emotional appeals about the family farm to market tobacco products. In other words, both Reynolds and Philip Morris were using the plight of the farmer to create new identifications for tobacco companies, to argue “we’re not about smoking or cancer, we’re about the small farmers that are so important to communities.” Although this was

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<sup>95</sup> I found images of these twelve paintings on the Internet and indeed, they all depict work on the farm, with the exception of the final image which is a farm family watching their tobacco sell at auction.

not a new tactic for the companies at this time, it was certainly well-represented in specific campaigns.<sup>96</sup>

In April 1985, the “attack” rhetoric returned as growers and companies were described as “fight[ing]” the Reagan administration’s attempts to phase out the tobacco program. The bulk of this front page article turns out to be about the plans underway for a buyout of the pool stocks held by the Co-op, which had again grown too large, this time in part due to the tobacco of inferior quality left over from the 1983 drought year. In his message, the commissioner described the proposed buyout in vague terms, contrasting it with a doomsday scenario in which, if the deal does not go through, “[t]he destruction of the tobacco program would result in a degree of economic chaos in Kentucky unmatched since the Great Depression” (2). These two articles combined to create an argument that farmers must approve this buyout—which, not so incidentally, also included a reduction of the support price by thirty-three cents per pound—that relies on praising the efforts of farmers in the “fight” and instilling fear that if they do not continue the fight by voting for the buyout they risk losing everything. Farmers were successfully convinced that the 1985 buyout of pool stocks and reduction of the support price was the only way to save the program; the referendum passed.

At this time, KDA also stepped up its efforts to help farmers diversify. In July 1985, the KDA reported on farmers who were growing green peppers (the quintessential failed crop in failed diversification narratives, as I will discuss in a later chapter) with the encouragement and the marketing assistance of KDA. Unfortunately, the following

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<sup>96</sup> Not covered in the KDA News were the multiple instances during this period in which farmers rallied in Washington or Kentucky’s capitol, Frankfort, against tax increases, FDA regulation, and other legislative “attacks.” It is well known that tobacco companies actively recruited and financially supported farmers’ central roles in these protests. See also Benson for similar tactics in the flue-cured region.

October the KDA reported, in an article with the headline, “1985 was a growers’ learning experience,” that this attempt to find “profitable alternatives to tobacco” was not as profitable for the farmers as they and the KDA had hoped (10). The message was that farmers were looking at what they did wrong in hopes of trying again next year, although clearly marketing was a large part of the problem.

The “Twelve Months of Tobacco” paintings were featured again in July 1985, as they were evidently displayed at a “farm heritage weekend” in Louisville, although the event was not described in any detail (12). In October 1986, the Commissioner’s message returned to the rhetoric of attack and the economic defense of tobacco’s importance to farmers; throughout the 1980s, the attacks on tobacco came in the form of attempts to dismantle the tobacco program, rather than in the form of tax increases (as in the 70s and 90s). The commissioner expressed his hope that 1987 would be a better year for tobacco farmers because “[t]obacco is what pays the bills...tobacco is something most farmers grow some of. Try as they might, opponents of tobacco will not in our lifetime succeed in doing away with the kind of program we need to allow this element of the Kentucky farm economy to survive” (2). This was during the nationwide farm crisis of the 1980s, and tobacco was still paying the bills while other crops were not; Kentucky, in fact, fared better during the farm crisis because of tobacco and the predominance of small farms. In one of the most interesting tobacco displays in the entire 63 years of the newsletter, this issue included a full-page tobacco crossword puzzle with over 200 clues, mostly tobacco related, leading to terms ranging from tomahawk (used to cut tobacco) to blue mold (a particularly nasty airborne disease that can destroy a tobacco crop) (6). The puzzle might suggest that knowledge of tobacco production was or should be common

knowledge, or that tobacco knowledge was becoming increasingly specialized knowledge as the crop was increasingly threatened. Certainly, however, it is a further claim to KDA's authority over this knowledge.

Tax threats returned in the late 80s, and in April 1987 there was an article on the current "attack on Kentucky's economy" through efforts to raise the cigarette tax (7). In July 1987 the Toss Chandler tobacco exhibit was on display at the Kentucky Museum at Western Kentucky University, along with an exhibit of crafts made by tobacco farmers.<sup>97</sup>

The KDA News became a quarterly publication in 1983, and between that year and 1991 tobacco coverage of some kind was missing from only three issues. The opening of the markets and the tobacco exhibit at the state fair were inconsistently reported on, but heritage-based coverage of tobacco remained steady. Beginning in the late 1980s, tobacco was on the front page less and less frequently, and if it was there it was often below the fold. The need for farmers to diversify, particularly into food production, was the increasing focus, and the word "diversification" appeared more and more often.

In April 1989, the remarks made by a Philip Morris representative at a statewide agriculture conference were summarized; he gave a mixed message to the audience, noting that the "next few years should be good ones for burley producers. But he warned that tobacco would continue to come under attack in Congress" (7). Quotas were in fact raised 24% in 1989, and it was feared that "underproduction" was making US burley

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<sup>97</sup> This exhibit, "Handmade Harvest," was a traveling exhibit of folk art made by members of tobacco farming families from eight tobacco-producing states, including Kentucky. Although a handful of tobacco-related items were included (a set of two paintings of tobacco work, tobacco tools, and twists of tobacco), most of the items in the exhibit were folk art objects typical of the region—baskets, wood carvings, furniture, quilts, woven items, etc. (Based on photocopies of the exhibit materials obtained from the Kentucky Museum.)

growers seem undependable—a strange accusation since the companies and the government determined how much tobacco could be grown each year, and because this was a mere four years after the buyout of the pool stocks. In January 1990, Danny McKinney of the Burley Co-op was quoted as saying that although quota was raised by 24%, farmers only planted 18% more (8). He mentioned labor shortages as one cause, and, indeed, in April 1990, the first mention of migrant labor as a solution to labor shortages appeared (5). While labor would have been a major impediment to increased production, access to 24% more of all of the inputs that farmers needed—from seed and fertilizer to equipment and land—would also have proven difficult for farmers to come by. This is a clear example of the way in which rising and falling quotas were used to keep farmers scrambling to meet the needs of the tobacco companies, and they were then consistently blamed for over- or under-production.

### **The Lonely Voices of the 1990s: Tobacco's Fall**

In July 1990, the Chairman of the legislative Tobacco Task Force, Representative Donnie Gelding, used the guest column (one of a handful during this time) of the KDA News to describe the “attacks” by the “anti-tobacco lobby,” which was once again trying to raise taxes and destroy the tobacco program (4). He noted that quota was up 2.5% in 1990, and stated, “This must come as quite a surprise to anti-tobacco zealots who are claiming that tobacco is a dying industry” when in fact the tobacco program, according to Representative Gelding, was the healthiest of all federal agriculture programs. This remark now reads like foreshadowing of what was to come in the next two decades, as the tobacco program ended, and tobacco truly has come to be seen as a dying if not dead

agricultural tradition. Gelding's opinion pieces during this time fill the role that was once filled by the commissioner's message, since the days of editorializing commissioners are largely over. Yet, by 1990, the arguments of Gelding and a handful of others feel lonely in the pages of the newsletter, as they represent a dwindling number of voices.

By this time, there was rarely a direct reference to health issues; that battle seems to have been accepted as lost. The number of articles that covered self-evident aspects of tobacco production sharply declined. An October 1990 cover photo of a scene from a tobacco harvest, with the caption "Fall Scene, Kentucky Style," represents one of the last images that I would argue is visual epideictic speech about the seemingly unquestioned idea that *this is what fall looks like in Kentucky*, and what it will continue to look like. The same issue includes a photo of Bobby Preston, winner of the Garrard County tobacco cutting contest for the ninth year in a row (3).

In January 1992, there was a guest column by Senator Ford entitled "Tobacco program is still vital to state," confirming the marked shift in tone from attack rhetoric to something bordering on resignation. Ford wrote, "I took pride in my [tobacco] crop...I know there are thousands of Kentucky farmers experiencing that same justified pride as they take their burley crop to the market..." and "We have fought hard for our burley program and I believe that every person involved in the industry can take pride in the strides that have been made. Now is not the time to let our guard down..." (3). Here the fight was starting to sound like it took place in the past—he *took pride* in his crop, and we've *fought* hard—as though Ford was trying to keep the soldiers in the fight for tobacco from fleeing the battle field: "Now is not the time to let our guard down."



President Clinton provided the fodder for one of the last “fights” for tobacco, although this one was fought in milder terms in the KDA News. In April 1993, the KDA noted that the last burley market was “one of the best in history in terms of price and volume” (and instead of a reward growers will face a 10% quota cut in the coming crop year), but there was an upcoming fight against tobacco tax increases that, according to the commissioner, was going to be difficult to win (1). The commissioner sounded resigned to tax increases, as he wrote about his hope that policy changes would be put into place, linked to the tax increases, to help tobacco producers. In January 1994, the photo on the front page was of the commissioner and President Clinton discussing Clinton’s proposed tobacco tax, although there was no accompanying article—leaving the substance of the discussion in question.

Also in January 1994, Commissioner Logsdon provided a rare moment of direct criticism of the tobacco companies, devoting his column to the power that they maintain over farmers: “Ever wonder why tobacco farmers seem to be in a continual state of confusion and frustration? Maybe it’s because the tobacco companies want it that way” (2). According to the commissioner, tobacco farmers were told they were not producing enough burley just a few years ago so they stepped it up, and now they are being told they are over-producing. They were told to stop stripping into just one grade, and they stripped into three; now they are getting paid just about the same prices for all grades. The previous year the companies didn’t complain about the price, and now they are claiming that “U.S. tobacco is terribly overpriced in the world market and that farmers must accept a lower price in order to compete” (2). He went on to argue that the companies convinced the farmers to protest the tax increase; while he agreed that they all

needed to unite and fight against the Clinton tax increase, he wanted to see the companies make a commitment to growers.

The rarity of this explicit critique of the tobacco companies makes it all the more powerful, but it is also telling of how times had changed. Logsdon's strong words signal a shift in the relationship between the KDA and the tobacco companies; in earlier times, the KDA News presented a picture of the tobacco industry as controlled by the companies and supported, rhetorically, by the state. By the mid-1990s, public opinion about tobacco manufacturers had changed markedly, a fact that would have made it extremely advantageous for the KDA to distance themselves—and farmers—from the companies. This combined with the growing resignation that tobacco was going to be less important in the future because it could not escape stigma, declining markets, and other challenges, are all behind Logsdon's critique—however accurate and needed.

In April 1994, the Commissioner returned to the defense of tobacco from the attacks of the Clinton administration, arguing that the Clinton administration was trying to tax tobacco out of existence. But, he introduced a preamble to his argument that articulates a new position on tobacco use for the KDA: "I do not advocate smoking, but I am a strong believer that public policy should be based on facts, not emotion. Anti-tobacco forces are seeking to eradicate tobacco by making cigarettes unaffordable and unavailable." People have the right to make informed decisions about smoking, he argues. He also noted—without noting the irony—that recent state legislation required the KDA to enforce underage smoking bans, and he informed readers that "We did not seek this responsibility, but I want all Kentuckians to know that we will take this seriously" (2). This is a new phase, one in which the KDA conceded that tobacco use is

harmful, and the Commissioner attempted to discursively separate farmers from that harm; in addition, however, the KDA is also trying to separate farmers from tobacco use.

In July 1994, Governor Jones guest authored a piece entitled, “Fairness essential to tobacco growers,” in which he argued against the proposed federal tobacco tax increase. “As a tobacco farmer myself, I realize how important tobacco is to our state’s economy. My wife and I raise over 150,000 pounds every year, and we depend on the income we generate from this crop” (3). He argued that if the tax was going to be increased, tobacco farmers should be compensated for the lost income that would result. This period marks the beginning of discussions about farmer compensation for lost income, which became a reality later with the Master Settlement Agreement and the tobacco buyout, but it can also be read as a sign of resignation, a sign that the governor would continue to fight for tobacco farmers but he was realistic enough to see that the end was coming. “We must continue to fight to see that tobacco companies use homegrown, rather than imported leaf.” “If we do not, we will wake up one day, our allotment will be gone, and we won’t have anything to show for it” (3). Importantly, Jones was the last Kentucky Governor that was also a tobacco grower.

The commissioner’s message in April 1995 was focused on cattle, but included the statement that “When you add it all up, only tobacco stacks up with cattle’s impact on the state economy” (2). In this last instance of an explicit argument in the KDA News that tobacco income continues to be of importance to the farm economy, the commissioner pointed out that tobacco was the top priority for Kentucky farmers while cattle provided a side income.

In January 1996, incoming Commissioner Billy Ray Smith (a tobacco farmer) also sent a message that combined a vow to fight for tobacco with a subtext that implied that tobacco was fading, stating that he “will not forget tobacco. ‘I will support tobacco wholeheartedly,’ he said. ‘If people want tobacco, we should be growing it and getting money for it. It’s part of our heritage’” (1). By vowing not to “forget” tobacco, he implied that it was fading from view—becoming heritage—since you don’t forget what is directly in front of you. In May 1996, the KDA proclaimed that Commissioner Smith had taken the lead against teen smoking—a very different attitude from his predecessor’s grudging acceptance of being charged with this new duty, and a very long way from the commissioners of decades earlier, who applauded increases in smoking rates as good for Kentucky’s economy.

### **An “Uncertain” Future**

The rhetoric of the “uncertain” future of tobacco became explicit in the fall 1998 issue, eventually replacing the rhetoric of attack until tobacco faded from the pages of the KDA News altogether. The first appearance of the shift from the language of “attack” to “uncertainty” was in an article on the importance of agriculture to Kentucky: “However, recent concerns over the political fate of the tobacco industry and the economic weakness of crop and livestock industries have left Kentucky farm families uncertain about the future” (4).

The winter 1998 issue included the classic photo of the Commissioner at a tobacco warehouse on the opening day of the marketing season. In the photo, however, Smith suggests tobacco heritage by wearing a trench coat and a fedora hat, the garb of his

1940s and 50s predecessors; by 1998, neither fedoras nor trench coats were commonly worn in tobacco warehouses. There was no opening day photo in 1999, but it returned in 2000.

The 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between the state Attorneys General and the four major tobacco companies was first mentioned in January 1999. There was never any coverage of the lawsuits in the newsletter; in this and future issues the focus was on discussions about how Kentucky's share of the funds might best be used to the benefit of farmers and the promotion of the agricultural economy. The rhetoric of uncertainty picked up steam in April 2000 with a front page article, "What's next for tobacco? Many issues unresolved after devastating winter." According to the article, "As this newspaper went to press, Kentucky tobacco farmers were facing more uncertainty than they had encountered since the price-support system was adopted some 60 years ago. Several issues remained unresolved on the eve of tobacco setting time" (1). This uncertainty revolved around how Phase I Master Settlement funds would be used, the beginning of direct contracting between farmers and tobacco producers, and quota cuts at the astounding rate of 45.3 %.<sup>98</sup> "Critics of the plan [by Philip Morris to contract in order to receive the grades it wants] charged that it was the first step toward eliminating the price support program" (3). Indeed it was.

The July 2000 issue featured a lengthy article about three tobacco farmers and the decisions they were making about the future, in a front page piece entitled "2001: A Farm

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<sup>98</sup> Phase I monies are those that states received in the settlement, and as I will discuss in another chapter, Kentucky chose to put 50% of their Phase I monies into agriculture diversification efforts (the other 50% initially went to fund early childhood education). Phase II monies went directly from a trust set up by the companies to annual payments to farmers, based on how much tobacco they raised. Phase II payments ceased as part of the buyout negotiations.

Odyssey”—a fascinating title, implying a voyage or quest. The first farmer, Roger Quarles (who later became president of the Burley Co-op and with whom I conducted two interviews), intended to keep raising tobacco, and had just built a new tobacco barn before the massive quota cut. Quarles provided a perspective on the search for alternative crops that is shared by many growers: “I couldn’t see not growing tobacco in favor of growing something in the alternative category that may or may not work. I don’t see the smartness in quitting a high-income crop like tobacco as long as it is available. Our problem in trying to think of something else is that you have to have a consistent income. Bills are consistent. The mortgage is consistent.” (8) He then pointed out the irony that “[w]e always used tobacco income as a subsidy for trying something new” (8), making it even more risky to try new things in this time of shrinking quotas. He went on to say that he thought the tobacco companies were purposefully not buying American tobacco; “The tobacco companies’ buying decisions today ‘are not based on traditional ways of doing things, or else they’d be purchasing more.’” He concluded, “I don’t think we’ll ever lose tobacco. I think we’ll always grow tobacco. But there’s going to be some major changes” (8).

The two other farmers featured were working to build vegetable co-ops but also continued to raise tobacco, suggesting agreement with Quarles’ argument that tobacco income remained a safety net. One of them, Paula Franke, described “Philip Morris’ plan to contract with some growers, [as] ‘akin to union-busting,’” saying about the company, “They’re not killing a way of making a living. They’re killing a way of life.” She’s “pessimistic about the future of tobacco in Kentucky. ‘I think it’s going to be the end,’ she said. ‘I think this is the last year we’ll see tobacco production as we have known it. I

think it's over'" (9). Here she described tobacco as a way of life that was coming to an end, echoing discourses found in media reports of the time, as I will discuss in another chapter.

From this point forward, tobacco is mentioned almost entirely in passing; it was very rarely the exclusive subject of articles. In January 2001, the photograph of the opening of the markets once again appeared, with the heading "The tradition continues" (2). The obvious reference is to ongoing auctions despite the first year of direct contracting with Philip Morris, but the subtext is debates about whether contracting will bring the end of the tobacco warehouse system. In this same issue, the commissioner commented—in the manner of an afterthought at the end of his message—about the upcoming referendum on the continuation of the program: "Also, tobacco farmers should be sure to cast their ballots in the February election on whether to continue the federal tobacco quota and price support program" (4). In marked contrast to past commissioners' messages, he offered neither further input on the referendum nor an opinion on how growers should vote.

The "uncertainty" rhetoric continued in October 2001, with tobacco mentioned in passing in an article about KDA's efforts to "boost" vegetable cooperatives: "With the changing face of tobacco and lower commodity prices for traditional crops, Kentucky's farmers are actively seeking ways to add value to their products and diversify their operations" (1). In January 2002, Commissioner Smith mentioned the uncertainty of the burley tobacco program amidst lowered quotas and increased direct marketing. The January 2003 issue included a front-page auction photo with the title "Auctions survive-

for how long?” and a brief caption describing the burley market, in contrast to market updates in the past that took up one or more lengthy articles.

The rhetoric of heritage is unmistakable in July 2003, with a front page article about the winning photographs in a KDA photography competition. The winning photo depicts a window through which tobacco can be seen hanging in an old structure. Weeds grow tall in front of it, and a wooden beam crosses diagonally through the center of the photo, suggesting that this tobacco has been abandoned or that the viewer is being given a glimpse into the past. The headline for the article describing the winning photos reads “Photos reflect past, future of Ky. Agriculture” (7); what counts as *past* and what counts as *future* is noted explicitly. The winning photo was chosen “for its artistic quality and the quiet symbolism of the history of tobacco in the Commonwealth” (7). In contrast, in the second place photo a three-year old boy waves at his grandfather as he cuts hay: “Judges said the photo showed hope for the future of the family farm” (7). Tobacco has been completely recategorized as a symbol of Kentucky’s past, an argument that is made visually as well as textually. In contrast to past tobacco “art,” this photo honoring tobacco does not feature the action of tobacco work but a passive image of tobacco hanging in a barn surrounded by weeds.

In October 2003, Commissioner Smith wrote his goodbye, mentioning tobacco once: “Much has been done but the future leaders of Kentucky agriculture still have much to do. As tobacco’s future remains uncertain, we must sustain the momentum we have established” (4). This was followed by Richie Farmer’s first commissioner’s message in January 2004, which included a brief mention of tobacco, “There can be no doubt that Kentucky’s agriculture community faces many challenges. Tobacco farmers are moving



to diversify their farm operations ...” (4). This statement reflects the message that he has made central to his administration: agricultural diversification (and the assumption that all tobacco farmers are participating). This issue included a photo of a “Silent Auction,” a heading with a dual meaning, since the direct meaning is the handheld bidding machines that were being used by buyers, replacing the classic chant of the tobacco auctioneer. But, there was also an indirect reference to the dying auction system, a system that would soon become silent with the passage of tobacco buyout legislation. There was no photo of the last auction marketing season of the federal tobacco program, for the sale of the 2004 crop.

In July 2004, there was once again an article that mentions tobacco at the state fair, but this time it was not about the tobacco exhibits (they were not mentioned, although they still take place). Instead, the passing reference provides more evidence of tobacco’s recategorization into the past: “The KDA will join in on the historical theme of this year’s fair. In the South Wing, the Department will celebrate the history of Kentucky agriculture with a mock tobacco barn, antique farm equipment and other displays alongside the fair’s historical education and culture booths” (3). This equation of tobacco barns and antique farm equipment suggests that the barns have lost their function. Elsewhere in this issue a headline reads, “Goat, veggie farming up as tobacco falls” (9); the article focuses on these farming alternatives, not on the fall of tobacco production.

Most amazingly perhaps, the 2004 tobacco buyout, widely touted as “one of the most dramatic changes in any U.S. agricultural policy over the last half century” (Tiller), went almost entirely unmentioned in the pages of the KDA News. There was never an article about the buyout, and the commissioner only mentioned it in passing in his

January 2005 message: “We face some serious challenges in the months and years to come. With the tobacco quota buyout, the state’s rural economy will never be the same” (4)—a statement that only serves to emphasize the odd fact that the newsletter did not report on it. The buyout was mentioned again in a January 2006 article on farm income. The article noted that “[c]rop cash receipts declined an estimated 19 percent in 2005, led by a more than \$150 million drop in tobacco and a \$123 million dip in the state’s major row crops, including corn, soybeans, and wheat” (8). These are statistics that make one wonder why there’s not a panic about the death of row crops in Kentucky, since the dollar difference between the “drop” (implying permanence and severity) in tobacco and the “dip” (implying a somewhat insignificant, temporary state) in row crops is relatively small. The article went on to report that tobacco buyout payments were helping to offset farm income losses, and quoted the University of Kentucky’s well-known agriculture economist; Will Snell told a group of farmers that “[tobacco] companies would like you to grow more burley in 2006 [...] But unless we get a 10- to 15-cent bump [per pound], we’ll continue to see a decline” (8). Snell has continued to comment about the potential for growth in the tobacco market, but he is largely a lone voice.

Although tobacco is no longer featured in the pages of the KDA News, as recently as January 2008 there was proof that it is still being raised by Kentucky farmers. A piece about a young farmer who won the national “Star Farmer” award (the first time a Kentuckian won this national award given to promising young farmers) included a list of crops raised by this self-made, twenty-one-year old farmer: cattle, hay, vegetables, fruit, and fifteen and a half acres of tobacco. Tobacco continues to appear in lists of crops grown by farmers, lists of topics at Extension Service field days, farm receipt statistics,

and, most often but indirectly, through discussions of the tobacco settlement funds. In a sense, tobacco as a self-evident portion of the whole picture of Kentucky farming is returning now that heritage rhetorics have largely been left behind by the KDA. At the same time, ongoing discussion of the uses of the settlement funds serve as a reminder of tobacco's importance in the past, as such articles focus on projects that are being carried out with the use of the funds, and these funds cannot be used for tobacco production, only for "diversification."

### **In Conclusion**

The newsletter of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture provides a view of the changing political context for tobacco over this sixty-four year period, demonstrating that despite its changing status, tobacco has long been a contested crop with significant economic and symbolic value. Even though cattle, hogs, forages, and other farm products together are featured in the newsletter far more frequently and consistently than tobacco, the coverage of tobacco demonstrates a self-consciousness about the crop that is very different from the coverage of other farm products. It was tobacco that was featured on inaugural floats (along with thoroughbreds and bluegrass) and in commissioned art—not the cattle that were and are also raised by tobacco farmers. Cattle operations (along with corn, forages, and other agricultural products that have risen and fallen in importance over the years) have remained a self-evident part of the agricultural economy,

rarely celebrated, while tobacco has long been central to a self-conscious presentation of Kentucky agriculture and identity, even with shifting meanings.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to a perspective on changing politics, the newsletter provides a case study of the use of epideictic speech to persuade an imagined audience made up of multiple constituencies. As the sanctioned voice of Kentucky agriculture, the KDA provides readers with “news” of the present state of agriculture; farmers and non-farmers alike are asked to see this news as the current state of Kentucky agriculture and imagine themselves as participants in the agricultural landscape. In the 1940s and into the 1950s, this meant an acceptance of tobacco as a vital agricultural commodity, and growing rates of smoking as good for Kentucky. With increased attention to the health effects of tobacco use in the 1950s and 1960s, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture became a vocal advocate for the industry, deploying rhetorics of tobacco’s economic importance in their defense of the crop and the products produced with it. Much of the rhetoric of this period was certainly political, meant to persuade the future action of readers, and yet, much of it can be understood as epideictic because it attempted to persuade readers that tobacco should be celebrated as an economic necessity in the present and, through the Burley Belle and similar pageants, as symbolic of Kentucky culture. Through articles and pictorials featuring tobacco work and coverage of tobacco festivals, exhibits, and the pageants, the KDA sought to persuade the non-farmer that the work of the tobacco farmer should be celebrated as a way of life, and at the same time persuade the tobacco man that

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<sup>99</sup> Kentucky is the largest producer of beef cattle east of the Mississippi, a statistic that comes as a surprise to most people—inside and outside Kentucky. Although bluegrass is celebrated as a Kentucky symbol, it is planted either as a lawn grass or as forage for horses, not for cattle.

the KDA understood what was important to him and had the authority to feed his own knowledge back to him, as official knowledge.

By the 1970s, the celebratory tone had receded somewhat as the KDA and its guest columnists became increasingly and more aggressively defensive in light of the “attacks” on tobacco from multiple fronts. Readers were to understand these attacks on tobacco as attacks on Kentucky more generally; as the Commissioner of Agriculture wrote in November 1976, “...we all live better in Kentucky because of tobacco” (2). Yet, as implied by this quote, rhetorics of tobacco heritage remained. The economic defense was joined by, and eventually replaced by, heritage as a defense of tobacco, with an increasing focus on tobacco’s importance in Kentucky’s history that lasted into the 1980s as health effects became more difficult to deny. Rather than continue to deny health issues, the KDA refocused its audience on tobacco as heritage with attempts to persuade readers that because tobacco had such historical importance it should continue to be valued in the present.

At the same time that the KDA presented a shifting self-consciousness about tobacco, in the pages of the newsletter certain self-evident features remained fairly constant until the last decade. Articles on new technologies and farming practices were the most consistently covered topics throughout, even though that is not the KDA’s primary role; they often report on research originating with the Cooperative Extension Service. In addition to articles devoted to technical aspects of tobacco production, articles about the tobacco program and other matters of policy were a primary focus of the KDA News for decades. The commissioner’s message continues today as a regular feature of the newsletter but under the current commissioner, now in his second term, it

serves almost exclusively as a celebratory site for agricultural diversification, and in particular for the promotion of “Kentucky Pride,” the Kentucky version of the movement that encourages consumers to buy from local farmers and food producers. As I will argue in a later chapter, the KDA now presents a picture of the Kentucky agricultural economy as centered on alternative farm products such as vegetables, aquaculture, and wine, as well as agritourism—despite farm receipts, which demonstrate a very different picture. It asks farmer readers to imagine themselves in the newsletters’ “exemplary stories of praiseworthy people [who have successfully replaced tobacco with other farming opportunities]—and in their image those addressed are invited to make themselves over” (G. Clark 20).

The significant decrease in self-evident tobacco coverage over the last decade is as important as a consideration of the type of news that the KDA covers and how they cover it. By the 1990s, a resignation that the days of tobacco’s reign were over had set in, even tobacco-as-heritage had largely disappeared by the late 90s, and the details of major events such as the Master Settlement Agreement and the tobacco buyout of 2004—which meant the end of the Depression-era program and drastic changes to the farm economy—were not reported on. By essentially ending its coverage of tobacco issues, the KDA argues that tobacco no longer matters or perhaps no longer exists in Kentucky. The knowledge that was once so important for the KDA to claim as its own has become a stigmatized knowledge from which the state now attempts to distance itself.

Yet, as recently as October 2008, the KDA News, now online, included a link to a Cooperative Extension Service press release on the importance of avoiding “quick curing” of housed tobacco in this drought year (a repeat of the 2007 season). Such self-

evident coverage of tobacco, as I mentioned above, may continue as celebratory attention to tobacco as “heritage” goes. Tobacco may no longer be celebrated by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, but it continues to be grown by many farmers. In the chapters to come—as I discuss stigma, heritage, nostalgia, and tradition and “transition”—I will refer back to the representation of tobacco in the Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter, comparing and contrasting it with other public discourses and the discourses of farmers.

#### CHAPTER 4: “You’re a demon if you raise tobacco”: *Tobacco Farmer* as a Stigmatized Category

*But because of those issues it’s really hard to tell the true story of tobacco and how good it is for Kentucky and the other states that grow it.*  
Dan Grigson, County Extension Agent for Agriculture and Natural Resources, Lincoln County

As I have attempted to demonstrate thus far in this dissertation, tobacco has long had economic as well as symbolic weight; yet as van Willigen and Eastwood point out, “At the symbolic level, tobacco has become increasingly contested” (180). Tobacco, of course, has had its critics from first European contact. In 1604, King James wrote Counter-blaste to Tobacco in which he blasted the claims then being made that tobacco had health benefits, particularly that it was a cure-all for numerous ailments and their opposites (James questions tobacco’s ability, for instance, to both awaken the minds of users and to help them to sleep). James also blasted the users of tobacco and the “sinnes and vanities” committed by them when they “take” tobacco (29), and he blasted the English for imitating not only the French and Spanish in the use of tobacco, but also the Indians, asking:

[S]hall we, I say, without blushing, abase ourselves so farre, as to imitate these beastly *Indians*, slaves to the *Spaniards*, refuse to the world, and as yet aliens to the holy Covenant of God? Why do we not as well imitate them in walking naked as they doe? In preferring glasses, feathers, such toys, to golde and precious stones, as they do? Yea why do we not denie God and adore the Devill, as they doe? (12 *emphasis in original*)



I briefly recounted historical examples of anti-tobacco efforts in the U.S. in Chapter 1, including prohibitions and anti-tobacco campaigns by well-known Americans. Anti-tobacco efforts reached cultural arenas as well, for instance in the case of an early twentieth century staging of Carmen “cast against a backdrop showing a dairy rather than a cigarette factory. Carmen herself entered carrying a pail of milk” (Robert 245). Such efforts had little effect on the acceptance of tobacco; after all, it was not even until World War II that the cigarette really took off, and cigarette consumption rose 75% between 1939 and 1945 (Axton 116). In the forward to the 1954 reprint of King James’ Counter-blaste, the author compares James’ treatise to recent counterblasts issued by cancer specialists and notes, “Both provoked comment, neither has reached definite conclusions. And so the cure of the tobacco leaf continues, and smoking remains a solace to many, the delectation of a few” (5). For this author, “definite conclusions” had not yet been reached, but they soon would be. Reports and editorials in the newsletter of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture make it clear that the 1950s were the beginning of the end of widespread social acceptance of tobacco use, as the defense of tobacco’s economic importance became an increasingly important topic in the pages of the newsletters in the mid-1950s.

It was over three and half centuries after King James’ Counter-blaste that the tides finally turned on tobacco use in American society, with the release of the 1964 Surgeon General’s report on smoking and health. The report made a connection between tobacco and illness that was taken more seriously by American consumers than any previous expression of belief about the harmful effects of tobacco products (cf. Wagner), leading to tobacco’s position as a symbol of addiction, disease, and death in American culture

and a resulting decline in tobacco use. Tobacco and users of it became increasingly stigmatized from this point forward.<sup>100</sup> In the decades since the Surgeon General's report, there has been a marked increase in popular recognition of the dangers of smoking and, more recently, of second-hand smoke.<sup>101</sup> The \$206 billion Master Settlement Agreement reached in 1998 between the four largest American tobacco companies and 46 state Attorneys General both symbolized and fortified the change in public attitudes regarding tobacco, as tobacco manufacturers settled with states that sought to recover medical costs associated with smoking-related illnesses.<sup>102</sup> In recent years, a growing number of municipalities—including Kentucky cities such as Lexington, Louisville, the capitol city of Frankfort, and an increasing number of smaller cities and towns—have banned smoking in restaurants and other public places, further signs of a decline in social acceptance of tobacco and its uses. Although it was tobacco itself and the act of smoking that was the primary focus of critics from King James forward, the tarnished symbolism of tobacco raises questions about the implications for the producers of the raw material: tobacco farmers.

The concept of “stigma” is central to understanding the situation for tobacco as a crop and those who grow it. Therefore, in this chapter I will examine stigma as it has

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<sup>100</sup> I am aware that the release of the Surgeon General's report serves as a major point in a particular emplotment (to once again borrow from Hayden White) of the history of tobacco, and there are many other important points. However in stressing the Surgeon General's report, I am following the lead of both oral and written sources.

<sup>101</sup> A 2009 *New York Times* article called attention to “third-hand smoke,” “the term being used to describe the invisible yet toxic brew of gases and particles clinging to smokers' hair and clothing, not to mention cushions and carpeting” (Rabin).

<sup>102</sup> Kentucky's participation in this lawsuit itself posed questions. A member of the Kentucky Attorney General's staff said in an interview in 2000, “[B]ut of course *tobacco* affects so many different parts of Kentucky's economy and is grown in 119 out of our 120 counties. Um, we've got a manufacturing plant in Jefferson County, there's tobacco warehouses strewn across the state I mean, it truly is...you know just just part and parcel of who we are as Kentuckians. And, and so we were, we kinda felt like if we were to sue the cigarette companies, it'd be kinda like Kentucky suing itself” (S. White). Nevertheless, Kentucky participated in the lawsuit.

been theorized by Erving Goffman and expanded upon by others, and consider the ways in which stigma theory is helpful in thinking about tobacco stigma and the ways in which this case study suggests the need for further stigma theory. The anti-tobacco examples I have mentioned—from King James’ Counter-blaste to twentieth-first century smoking bans—all tell a story of tobacco stigma as it affects tobacco users. In order to understand stigma as it affects the tobacco grower, I will discuss farmers’ expressions of recognition of the changing symbolism of tobacco (and their lack thereof) and their responses to these changes, including stigma “management” as described by Goffman, as well as a possibility not fully explored by Goffman: resistance. This chapter is intended to be brief, in order to contextualize the current status of tobacco farming in Kentucky and set the stage for the chapters that follow, chapters in which I will examine heritage, nostalgia, and tradition—all concepts that have been repeatedly examined, problematized, and redefined by folklorists, but not within the context of a once-revered cultural practice that becomes stigmatized.

## **Stigma**

“Stigma” has been most notably considered by Erving Goffman in his 1963 work Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. Goffman’s work has since been carried forward by others, particularly those in fields such as sociology and psychology. Goffman provides a useful, if limited, starting point for understanding stigma and the management of stigma in face-to-face interactions between stigmatized persons and those he calls “normals,” who he defines as, “[w]e and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue” (5). Goffman’s assumption here is that there is a

homogenous understanding of the categories “normal” and “stigmatized,” and this assumption has been challenged by scholars who followed him. For instance, Adbi M. Kusow argues that the case of Somali immigrants in Canada, “challenges a normatively shared understanding of a stigma-normal process” and raises the question “who stigmatizes whom?” (182).

Goffman begins by looking to the Greek’s definition of stigma as “bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier” (1), and he goes on to say that “[t]oday the term is widely used in something like the original literal sense, but it is applied more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence” (1-2). Goffman argues that stigma refers not to a person but “to an attribute that is deeply discrediting” to a person’s social identity (3). While as Goffman argues, stigma may be understood as based on “the disgrace itself” rather than bodily evidence, it seems to me that connections to the body remain, and that stigma continues to be understood as a sign of an inner flaw inherent in the bodily person (the signifier)—particularly if we understand stigma as rooted in an “attribute.” Although stigma may start with the “disgrace” it is perceived as encompassing the person.

Goffman considered primarily stigmas of the body such as disfigurement and disability, though he suggested three types of stigma: 1) “physical deformities” (which he treats most thoroughly in his examples), 2) “blemishes of individual character” (ranging from “weak will” to “dishonesty”), and 3) “the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion” (4). He also included references to homosexuality as a stigmatized category and to occupational stigmas such as prostitution—categories that are arguably perceived as bodily. Current stigma scholarship in folklore and related fields also maintains

connections to perceptions of bodily evidence of stigma, such as Sheila Bock's work with diabetes narratives, Jason Whitesel's work on "big" gay men, Amy Shuman's current work on the narratives of children with disabilities, and Diane Goldstein's ongoing work on women who kill their children.<sup>103</sup> The basis for stigma in each of these examples is bodily—the diseased (though unmarked) body, the fat body, the disabled body (or mind), and the dead body that is perceived as evidence of the "bad" mother. The first three examples, however, are about the bodies of the stigmatized and accusations of a lack care of the self, while the stigma in Goldstein's work is based on harm done to someone else's body (the bodies of children, now dead) through a bodily act.

Interestingly, tobacco farmers' stigma is arguably about both a lack of care for others and for self. Smoking<sup>104</sup> is of course a bodily act, and it is through the actions of smokers and the repercussions of those actions on the body that stigma turns back on farmers. In the most immediate sense, the stigma that tobacco farmers face is based on a perception of lack of regard for the bodies of others. How could they, the stigma seems to ask (and I have literally been asked), continue to grow a deadly product if they cared about the well-being of others, namely the users of tobacco products? However, those tobacco farmers who choose to continue to raise tobacco also stand accused of having a lack of regard for self, based on the common perception that tobacco will soon be gone, and they will be left with nothing to farm.

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<sup>103</sup> Sheila Bock, "'A Little Sugar': Performing the Vernacular in Diabetes Health Education" and Jason Whitesel, "Gay Men Boldly Performing the Fat Body Using Carnival" were both presented at the 2008 annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, Louisville, Kentucky, October 25, 2008; both papers are part of larger doctoral dissertation projects. References to Goldstein's and Shuman's work are based on personal communication with both.

<sup>104</sup> Users of smokeless tobacco are equally stigmatized, I would argue (although not necessarily in the same ways), but because public discourses most often focus on smoking, I will refer to tobacco users as smokers here.

The case of tobacco farmer stigma highlights a number of concepts raised by stigma theory, including sympathy, choice, blame, and shame. However, these concepts are not unique to tobacco stigma, but can be seen for instance, as central to Sheila Bock's work on diabetes and blame (people with diabetes are blamed for their "lifestyle choices") as well as other stigmas in American culture. For instance, women battered by intimate partners who "go back" are a stigmatized social category; because they stay in the relationship they lose our sympathy and we blame them for the violence. Abusers are most often not stigmatized but "battered women" are, seemingly because they have made a "choice" to stay in a situation in which they—their bodies—are being harmed.<sup>105</sup>

Stigma involves a negotiation of sympathy and blame, because we "feel sorry" for the stigmatized but we want to see them make the "right" choices and become more like us (Goffman's normals). If they do not, then we blame them, and they lose our sympathy. The more "choice" or freewill is understood to be associated with membership in a stigmatized category, the more blame comes to be placed on those in the category. Put another way, the degree of embodiment determines the degree of sympathy versus blame, as stigmatized categories that are understood as based entirely in the body result in more sympathy than blame, as they are understood as being less about "choice." Therefore, the tobacco farmer may face more blame than the diabetic who in turn faces more blame than the disabled child. Sympathy has an inverse relationship with the degree of embodiment, with the disabled child treated with the most sympathy and the tobacco farmer with the

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<sup>105</sup> The connected discourses of "choice," "freedom," and "rights"—which I will also discuss in terms of the "freedom" or "choice" to smoke—are of course complex in their political usages, at times contradictory. One might, for instance believe that individuals should have the right to make the bodily choice to smoke, but not believe in a woman's right to an abortion (to control over her body).

least. I am not arguing that those in these categories, as examples, are comparatively more or less stigmatized, but that the situation of stigma differs.

### **Tobacco and Stigma**

It is not difficult to understand *smokers* as having a “spoiled identity,” in Goffman’s terms; his descriptors “unusual,” “bad,” and “disgraceful” are all valuable in thinking about the stigmatized smoker. Smoking has become an increasingly *unusual* activity as smoking rates drop in the U.S. and non-smokers stake a firm claim on majority status; smoking has become a *bad* habit and smokers, through the stigma, *bad* people. Just as signs in the form of physical disability continue to be read as symbols of deeper weaknesses or moral failings, smoking has become a sign of deeper immorality.<sup>106</sup>

The question with which I am concerned, however, is not about the smoker, but instead, how the stigma of tobacco moved from smokers to growers of tobacco. Alternatively, how did growers escape the stigma for so long? Goffman considers both those who are born into a stigmatized category and those that through some circumstance move into a stigmatized category later in life. Importantly, however, he does not consider the consequences of the movement from “normal” to stigmatized of an entire category in which a person has lived her or his life.<sup>107</sup> Goffman does not acknowledge the creation of new stigma categories, the stigmatization of existing categories, or the

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<sup>106</sup> Discourses that focus on second- and third-hand smoke make the stigma of smoking about both lack of care of self and lack of care for others. In states such as California and Maine what was a stigmatized behavior is now a crime, due to recent laws imposing penalties on smoking in a vehicle with a minor. Such new laws demonstrate a fluid relationship between stigmatized behavior and criminalized behavior as what was once stigmatized may become criminalized (smoking in particular situations) and what was once criminalized becomes decriminalized but may remain stigmatized (such as homosexuality). This fluidity may be implicitly understood by farmers who defend tobacco as “a legal crop,” as I will discuss.

<sup>107</sup> Many smokers would (and do) argue that this has been their experience as well, of course.

dynamic nature of stigma more generally (although he does make brief reference to attributes that lose their stigma, 137). This is an important omission, one that folklorists are uniquely qualified to examine, given our interest in the dynamic aspects of culture.

My work in tobacco communities made it clear that “tobacco farmer” provides an example of the movement of an entire category from respect to stigma. Although there is no tangible marker of the point at which stigma spread from tobacco products and their users to those who raise tobacco, it has taken place within the lifetimes of present-day tobacco growers. Valerie Grigson, a bank manager whose husband continues to raise tobacco fulltime with his family, commented during our interview: “It was you know a prestigious thing to be a tobacco farmer and then. ‘Course we had all the lawsuits and all that and, everybody hates smoking now and, you know, you’re a demon if you raise tobacco.”<sup>108</sup>

As Grigson insinuates, the multiple lawsuits against tobacco manufacturers that took place in the 1990s might be understood as a specific series of events that provide at least partial explanation for the movement of the stigma from the product to the producer. The lawsuits, both those brought by individuals and those brought by states, were widely publicized, shining a public spotlight on the practices of the tobacco industry and raising questions about who is to blame, the addicted smoker (with “addiction” becoming a defense by eliminating “choice”) or those who make the products. In the search for a place to lay the blame, it follows that if the industry is culpable than so too are the producers of the raw materials, the farmers.

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<sup>108</sup> It’s interesting to recall James’ Counter-blaste here: according to Valerie the producer has now joined the Godless Indian.



While the tobacco lawsuits should certainly be understood as a factor in the stigmatization of the category, I wish to argue that there are additional factors. Goffman's definition is again helpful in understanding a second factor: tobacco farmers, like smokers, have become increasingly *unusual* as their numbers have declined. For instance, there were nearly 60,000 Kentucky farms on which tobacco grew in 1992, and in 2007 tobacco was grown on just over 8100 Kentucky farms (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture: Kentucky 27). However, while both industry-wide culpability and *unusualness* are important pieces of the puzzle, stigma theory offers additional, key, pieces.

Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan have significantly revised Goffman's notion of stigma. They argue that stigma is based on a "label" rather than an "attribute" because a label is "affixed" rather than inherent, allowing for variance over time and also leaving the question of "validity" open. Even more importantly, they add the dimension of power: "stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power—it takes power to stigmatize" (376), and therefore it takes an absence of power to be stigmatized. They argue that the difference between groups that are labeled and stereotyped but not stigmatized (lawyers, politicians, and white people are their primary examples) and those groups that *are* stigmatized come down to who does and who does not have power.<sup>109</sup>

Link and Phelan also return a degree of agency to the stigmatized through their critique of the tendency among social scientists to represent stigmatized persons or groups as victims, and through their argument that "people artfully dodge or constructively challenge stigmatizing processes" (378). Here, Link and Phelan go

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<sup>109</sup> To return to my example of women battered by intimate partners, advocates have long argued that such violence is based on gendered power imbalances. The battered has, and exerts, power over the battered.

beyond Goffman's theory of "managing" stigma, using "challenge" to suggest an active resistance in addition to the more passive act of "management." As I will discuss, tobacco growers and former growers both manage stigma and actively challenge and resist it.

First, however, it is important to consider the stigmatization of tobacco farmers as a loss of power. For much of Kentucky's history tobacco farmers—along with others in the industry, from warehouse owners to manufacturers—wielded a great deal of economic, political, and social power in their communities, as well as in local, state, and national politics. Throughout much of the twentieth century, raising a patch of tobacco, of whatever size, was by far the norm and not the exception, connecting back to the issue of unusual versus normal, as tobacco was once fully *normal*. Not only were tobacco farmers once central figures in communities, but until fairly recently it was the rare politician from Kentucky—whether at the local, state, or federal level—who did not either raise tobacco himself or at least own some quota and "have a fellow that raised it."<sup>110</sup> Tobacco farmers were considered a powerful constituency for politicians from tobacco regions. For instance a Lexington Herald-Leader columnist, writing about legislative issues in the late 1990s wrote:

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<sup>110</sup> Governor Paul Patton, who served from 1995-2003, was notable because he had not raised tobacco—a point that was commented on frequently as his administration dealt with the Master Settlement Agreement. However, as the owner of a coal company in Pike County, Governor Patton was well-versed in another Kentucky product that might be examined from the perspective of stigma. In the case of coal, however, coal miners have thus far escaped stigma and maintained a position of sympathy as the blame is placed on the coal companies; the miners, unlike tobacco farmers, are understood as victims even though both are understood to be under the thumb of the companies for whom they produce materials. This further suggests that sympathy, blame, and power are central to an understanding of stigma. Neither the coal nor tobacco companies are themselves stigmatized because they hold power and they do not arouse sympathy, only blame; coal miners have our sympathy, and are seen as powerless but not to blame, while tobacco farmers are met with some sympathy, have lost power, and are perceived as sharing the blame.

Tobacco politics in Kentucky used to be easy. To make it with the burley boys, a politician just had to know that blue mold wasn't the stuff on old Swiss cheese, that topping was more than what goes on a pizza, that the companies were out to take what wasn't nailed down and that the tobacco program was next to godliness. You didn't tax tobacco, not a cent. And you talked about "alternative" crops, about how farmers were too dependent on the leaf, but you never meant it. (B. Bishop)

Kentucky's eminent historian, the late Thomas D. Clark, wrote in his 1977 Agrarian Kentucky, "[O]nly a reckless politician would suggest support of measures injurious to the Kentucky agrarian way of life" (ix). Over the course of Kentucky's history, the needs of the farmer—including and perhaps particularly the tobacco farmer—were central to Kentucky politics, and according to Clark, "Leading their constituencies in and out of crises, these masters have ever paid tribute to the basic precept that the agrarian way was the wholesome way. They promised never to tax it out of existence or to bring it under threat of revolutionary change" (130). According to van Willigen and Eastwood, writing twenty years later, however, "The political influence of tobacco people is decreasing" (180); this was clearly demonstrated in my previous chapter in which I analyzed the coverage of tobacco in the Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter over its 64-year history. As the number of tobacco farmers declined, and as the tobacco stigma has grown, political power has waned; conversely, if we follow Link and Phelan's line of thinking, this decline of power has allowed for the category "tobacco farmer" to become a stigmatized category. Clearly, the tobacco companies not only continue to hold and exercise the power they began to build in the late nineteenth century through the formation of the American Tobacco Company ("The Trust"), but their power over growers has increased since the tobacco buyout, while tobacco farmers have lost even

more economic power through the loss of the price support system (and warehouse owners, with a handful of rare exceptions, have ceased to exist).

Not only is power an important element in the process of the stigmatization of the category of “tobacco farmer,” but power is central to discourses that I will discuss in coming chapters—such as heritage and agricultural diversification discourses—that have played significant roles in the spread of tobacco stigma from users to farmers. I will put aside questions about how the category “tobacco farmer” became stigmatized and return to them in future chapters, after I have further established the existence of stigma.

### **A Tarnished Symbol**

A county extension agent in his late twenties told me, “Only in my life time I guess has tobacco really become more the the bad, you know the dirty word that it is” (Meredith). According to Wendell Berry, “Tobacco became an authentic moral issue only within the last thirty years” (Berry 56). Members of tobacco communities point to various markers that exemplify the stigma now associated with all things tobacco. One example of the changed public perceptions of tobacco—the *crop*—can be seen in changed attitudes about Tobacco Queen contests. Like other agricultural beauty pageants—Pork Princesses, Dairy Queens, Strawberry Queens—Tobacco Queen contests took place at fairs and festivals. In the 1930s in the Brightbelt tobacco region of Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia, such pageants served as what historian Blain Roberts has called “a shrewd response to the economic problems the tobacco industry faced during the Depression” (31-32). Such contests were organized by tobacco warehouses and marketing councils in order to compete for the business of farmers and buyers through

the display of what Roberts calls “woman-as-commodity crop” and “tobacco incarnate,” dressed in skirts and bikini tops crafted from tobacco leaves and posed atop piles of tobacco (40).

A few decades later, tobacco queens such as the “Queen of Tobaccoland,” crowned at the National Tobacco Festival in Richmond, Virginia, served as promoters of not only local markets but of the industry as a whole. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the pageants were linked directly to the “health scares” that were becoming increasingly serious in the mid-50s, only to reach the point of no return with the release of the Surgeon General’s report on smoking and health in 1964. So while the pageants of the 1930s had an economic agenda internal to the industry—to draw in tobacco farmers and buyers—by the 1960s, the pageants served a public relations role that went beyond the industry, an attempt to put a healthier face on tobacco as a means of deflecting attention from the “health scares.” Throughout the 1960s, the tobacco queens and princesses served as “ambassadors” for the industry. In 1962, a Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter article about the search for a state tobacco princess noted that “[t]his Department is cooperating in this project because Commissioner Beauchamp believes that it provides an opportunity for the promotion of the tobacco industry at a time when the industry is beset by health scares and foreign market complications” (3). An August 1965 article in the KDA newsletter about the upcoming Tobacco Princess contest leads with the headline, “State’s Best Product to Promote Top Cash Crop” (3). The commodification of women’s bodies—“products”—could hardly be more overt. In October 1970, the KDA announced that “Talent will not be a factor” in the 1970 Burley

Belle pageant. Instead, the contestants will be judged on their recitation of an essay that they are each to write on the topic “What Burley Tobacco Means to Kentucky” (1).

By the early 70s, burley belles, queens, and princesses had faded from the pages of the Department of Agriculture newsletter as tactics for defending tobacco production changed course, and in 1984 the National Tobacco Festival ended. Local pageants continued however, including one held at the Garrard County (Kentucky) Tobacco Festival. Jonathon Shell, who at nineteen years old in 2007 raised over 110 acres of tobacco with his father and grandfather in Garrard County, told me:

Used to [...] you’d have the Tobacco Festival Queen. And I’d hear people all the time say “Well who would wanna be the Tobacco Festival Queen?” “Who would wanna have that title?” You know, stuff like that, “who would wanna be the Tobacco Queen.” (3/19/07)

The Tobacco Queen phenomenon is obviously a rich topic begging for further examination—loaded as it is with gendered meanings, as women were put on display to change the image of an industry dominated by tobacco men—but here I can only point out that her rise and fall clearly demonstrates the changing status of the crop she was once charged with promoting.

Jonathon’s generation has witnessed other tangible signs of the changed symbolism of the crop. For instance, many schools, including Garrard County High School, have ended tobacco production projects that had long been part of their agricultural education programs. These projects served dual purposes as hands-on educational experiences and as income generators for schools through the sale of the tobacco produced by students and teachers. A vocational agricultural teacher in Garrard County told me in an interview about his decision to end the tobacco production projects

in his program about a decade ago. His concerns were in large part about safety and liability issues; tobacco production, after all, involves cutting plants with sharp knives and climbing high up into the barn to house the crop. He was also responding to the changing symbolism of the crop, however:

[A]nd then it was just about the mid 90s there was a push to stop smoking, and there was this uh idea of does it make sense to be growing this stuff in a public situation? And then does it make sense to be promoting its growth. And it's a difficult thing to answer in this community. Extremely difficult, and I don't know that there is a right or a wrong answer to it but when you combined all the things, the way that I saw it, with the combination with everything it just made a lot of sense not to- [...] [I]t's just, again, it's a difficult thing to answer, and uh, some people would argue to their death in this county that we need to be teaching more about tobacco. And some people would just be so vehemently against it that you know, they raise more Cain than all get out, about it. So it's- I just felt like I said hey, let's just, we'll just bow out gracefully. (Parsons)

Although this teacher was quick to assure me that there had been no public debate about the program, and that he had made this decision without direction from the school board, he did tell me that in another county (that he choose not to name), vocational agriculture teachers had made tobacco work mandatory (unlike this teacher) and had suffered public reprimand and a forced end to tobacco projects. One county extension agent described a recent attempt by the vocational agricultural teachers in his county's high school to reinstitute a tobacco project; this agent began to work with the teachers to locate a farmer willing to provide land and barn space for the project, only to learn that the school "wouldn't condone it" because they "They didn't wanna be associated with tobacco" (K. Bishop).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> A 2004 *Washington Post* article examined this "Controversy" in which "Students Cultivate A Crop They're Taught to Avoid" (Roig-Franzia). Although this article does not report the number of schools with tobacco projects, the author notes that 39 Kentucky schools owned tobacco quotas at the time. Some of these quotas would have been worked by students and some leased out; in either case the quotas provided

While school programs about the dangers of smoking have become as universal as those about oral hygiene and saying “no” to drugs, and might seem impossible to fault, such lessons take on complexities in tobacco growing communities. Valerie Grigson expressed the frustration she has experienced when her children have come home from school repeating the messages given to them in anti-tobacco instruction, “I’m like how do you tell your kids ‘Boys, this is what pays for your house, this is what pays for your car, this is what pays for your Christmas?’” At the same time, Grigson “pray[s] every night they don’t smoke.” She went on to describe the irresolvable dilemma that she faces as a mother:

But it’s hard at the same time to think- you know do you hate your kids because you’re telling em, you know, “we’re raising something that they’re telling you at school’s gonna kill you and we’re telling you don’t ever do it” and, but still it infuriates me. You know that’s not their choice. You know, preach to my kids about other things but, you know maybe if we lived somewhere else preach to them about that but, don’t tell em that...

### **The Stigmatized Farmer**

In the quote above, Valerie Grigson is describing not just the changing status of a crop, but changing public attitudes about what was once a respected occupational category, as well as an identity: tobacco farmer. In a speech to the Burley Auction Warehouse Association in 1990, John M. Berry, Jr. (former state legislator and brother to Wendell, both sons of John Berry Sr. who was involved in establishing the Burley Co-op) reflected on what it meant to him to be from a family of five generations of tobacco farmers, noting that when he was growing up, “People distinguished themselves and gained

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income for the schools. In some cases, schools were able to raise tobacco research plots through the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.



stature in the community, based on how many sticks they could cut or strip in a day, or how neatly they could tie a hand, or if their crops consistently topped the market” (Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association 129-30). He went on to say:

My family and our neighbors and our ancestors have always believed that, as tobacco farmers and warehousemen, we were engaged in a noble and honorable business. I have seen no facts and heard no arguments that convince me to the contrary. (Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association 132)

Kathleen Bond, who raised tobacco with her husband and his family all of her married life, told me,

One thing that’s really changed is when we got married and people raised tobacco it was a good, honest way to make a living. And at the time that we got out [2003], if you raised tobacco, you were dirt, you know you were contributing to the cancer. (K. and J. Bond)

These descriptions mark a drastic shift, as what was once among the most respected of occupational identities is tarnished. In their descriptions, Berry refers to farmers as “noble and honorable” and Bond uses “honest way to make a living”; the use of such terms of respect serves to emphasize just how much things have changed. The feelings of blame expressed by Bond are confirmed quantitatively through a study conducted in 1995, in which 528 U.S. tobacco farmers and 991 Americans who do not grow tobacco (living throughout the U.S.) were interviewed. This study, which was based on brief scripted interviews, examined attitudes about and knowledge of tobacco, tobacco farmers, and the federal tobacco program, as well as issues such as diversification and taxes. Of the 991 non-tobacco farmer respondents, 29% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Tobacco farmers are responsible for health problems

experienced by smokers,” and 45% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “Tobacco companies are responsible for health problems” (Altman et. al. 119). It is significant that this study took place in 1995, as litigation against tobacco companies was heating up nationwide. Although farmers were not being blamed at the same level that manufacturers were, they were not far behind, and it is clear that they are increasingly aware of this fact. Altman and his fellow researchers included statements from tobacco farmers (quoting from other sources) in which they described being made to feel like a “criminal” or “harbinger of death” (125, 121).

The stigma now associated with tobacco farming affects farmers as well as agricultural professionals who specialize in tobacco, especially when they travel outside of the tobacco-producing region. One county extension agent told me:

[S]ay a tobacco farmer goes on vacation to, you know his wife makes him go to Boston or somewhere just out of, out of an example. And uh, you know they’re having dinner with some other, you know high-faluting people. I think you know he tells them that you know he’s a tobacco farmer, you know in some circles that wouldn’t be looked on very favorably. And I think maybe even some of our [University of Kentucky College of Agriculture] people, you know if they go to other you know high levels of academia and they’re talking about all this stuff, you know, tobacco is not, you know it’s just not viewed as being that wholesome a thing to work on... (Meredith)

Stigma is often described not in terms of local attitudes, but attitudes in other parts of the country, particularly northern metropolitan areas such as New York City and Boston.

This perhaps most obviously reflects the rural/urban and North/South divides perceived by many Americans, but the inclusion of travel in such descriptions is important as well.

More than once, when I asked about people’s attitudes toward tobacco farmers I was given hypothetical examples of farmers on vacation being asked what they did for a

living by city folks or others from the north and decisions those farmers made about whether to say they were tobacco farmers or to instead stress their cattle operations. According to Kevan Evans, a former tobacco farmer who now runs an agritourism business (an orchard and farm stand with events and activities that draw families out to spend time on their farm) with his daughter:

And it got to a point where, you really couldn't go out- You know if you went out of the state and they said "What do you do?" "Well I'm a tobacco farmer" you know- I mean they kinda frowned on you. You know but I can go out and say "Well I'm a vegetable farmer" "Oh okay yeah! Let's talk about it." (K. and J. Evans 9/24/06)

When I asked one county extension agent about public perceptions of the crop today, he replied, in part:

If you're asking Ann if if a tobacco farmer in Kentucky, can go to a national meeting somewhere [...] and stand up and say "I'm a tobacco farmer from Kentucky" and be proud of it- I think there has to be a little bit of stigma, that they don't do that. [...] As I've aged in [laugh] in this position and have been able to to go to more and experience more national type meetings, or people from other places, yeah, when you when you- the connotation of tobacco farmer, now, is is not, that good wholesome, you know producing you know good food and fiber for the United States. In other words I think yeah there is a a we're- this is a vice. (Moore)

Goffman describes stigma as "an undesired differentiation from what we anticipated" (5), a description applicable to the management of stigma in hypothetical and real situations in which farmers meet outsiders and define themselves as cattle farmers rather than tobacco farmers, in order to manage their social identities in situations of perceived stigma. In these examples, farmers are managing rather than actively resisting stigma, as in examples I will get to. This is why these hypothetical examples

involve travel; situations of travel provide the opportunity to choose a social identity in a way that interactions at home do not. Situations of travel provide what Goffman would call a “discreditable” situation, in which the stigmatized person faces *the risk of* discreditation and therefore the chance to manage it, as opposed to a “discredited” situation, in which the stigma is immediately obvious, and therefore there is no chance to hide. Although Goffman does not consider it, his argument can also be applied to location; what might be stigmatized in one location might be “normal” in another. Presumably, tobacco farming has been stigmatized outside of tobacco regions for far longer than it has been stigmatized within them, but tobacco farmers increasingly face stigma in locations closer to home, as the stigma has spread to their home regions.

As Valerie Grigson described her anger at anti-smoking campaigns and smoking bans to me, she made it clear that attitudes have changed within the burley region:

I’m like “where did you grow up?” [...] I’m like “you’re dad owned a farm. What are you do-” you know. “That that’s our-” And even in Lexington, I remember getting’ so furious when ... [*the smoking ban was passed*] ‘Cause I’m like “where- what do you think built all those buildings, have you lost your minds?” You know, and “maybe it is a thing of the past but my gosh have a little bit of loyalty.”

This lack of “loyalty” from those in her community and region with past involvement in tobacco (and who have benefited economically from it) is one of the things that angers her the most (as is apparent from her many false starts in this quotation).

Goffman also reminds us briefly that there are members of stigmatized groups who either do not recognize or refuse to accept stigma: “He bears a stigma but does not seem to be impressed or repentant about doing so” (6). However, he quickly moves on to

argue that in American society in the time of his writing, “the standards [the stigmatized individual] has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility...” (7). Here, he suggests not only an acknowledgement of membership in a stigmatized category, but some degree of agreement about the validity of the basis of the category, followed by shame. Goffman, in his concern for stigma “management,” does not recognize the questioning, on the part of the stigmatized, of the very basis of a stigma category—and this may be part of what Link and Phelan are getting at when they use the term “label” in place of Goffman’s “attribute.”<sup>112</sup> While I agree with Link and Phelan that “label” is a better term because Goffman is implying a naturalized attribute, I prefer the term *category*.

Goffman uses the term “category,” to refer to something less cohesive than a “group”; membership in a category made up of persons with “a particular stigma” offers the potential for groups to form (23). *Category* suggests something created by others that people are then put into, figuratively speaking. Harvey Sacks’ concept of “category-bound activities” is useful here as well, as he argues that the performance of particular activities associated with a category results in the perception by others of membership in that category.<sup>113</sup> Tobacco farmers continue the same “activity” (raising tobacco) and

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<sup>112</sup> Also see Pat Mullen’s use of labeling theory in his discussion of local character anecdotes, in which he argues that the telling of such anecdotes about deviants is part of the labeling process. According to Mullen, “The deviant is both a symbol of the group’s values and a threat to those values, so that the attitude toward the deviant is mixed” (*I Heard the Old Fisherman Say* 125). This is applicable to tobacco farmers, who, as small farmers, symbolize professed rural values of family, community, and regional heritage, even as they threaten those values because the crop they grow is now stigmatized.

<sup>113</sup> See Lectures 11, 12, and 13 in Sacks.

therefore remain in the category, but the perceptions of the category have changed as the category has become stigmatized.

We are all located in multiple categories; some categories are stigmatized and some not (by which I do not mean to imply that we are all in a category that is stigmatized). In addition, we often move in and out of categories (or *social identities*, according to Goffman), although there are categories that prohibit movement in or out. This is true for stigmatized categories as well; some allow for movement in and out, while others do not. This is similar to Goffman's discrediting and discreditable social identity, but in his model it is about *hiding* the attribute, and various forms of *passing* as something that the individual is not. I prefer movement, an active concept; moving in and out of categories implies varying degrees of agency. For instance, those situations in which farmers locate themselves in the category of "cattle farmer" even though they raise tobacco are not situations of "passing." They *do* raise cattle. But they also raise tobacco, and they are making a choice about which category to locate themselves within. Alternatively, they may choose to simply locate themselves within the wider category of "farmer," offering no descriptive tag. In contrast, many choose to proudly place themselves in the category of "tobacco farmer" or, to encompass long-standing associations between tobacco and the performance of an ideal masculine identity, "tobacco man."

Farmers also make decisions about whether or not to remain in the category "tobacco farmer" on a more permanent basis, as they make decisions about whether or not to continue to raise the crop. Their expressive responses to stigma, as well as to the moral issues underlying the stigma, are largely dependent on this decision. For instance,

I was given a number of examples of farmers who questioned the moral consequences of raising tobacco, but in these examples (primarily but not all given to me second-hand) the farmer had removed him or herself from the category before voicing her or his agreement with the validity of the ideas that underlie the stigma. On several occasions, I was told about farmers who had stopped growing tobacco for moral or religious reasons, and a few times I was told about someone that quit raising it “because he’s a Christian.” I did not have the opportunity to talk directly with such farmers, but one woman I interviewed—she was raised on a tobacco farm, married a tobacco farmer, and then leased her tobacco base out for twenty-five years after her husband’s death, quitting the year I interviewed her—told me:

Tobacco was our way of life our way to make a living but I really, deep down didn’t approve of, of selling it. How can you approve of selling something when you’re killing people? That just don’t make sense to me. But we didn’t know any other way to make a living. (Hinton)

Although she does not make the direct connection here, in our conversations and throughout our interview she stressed to me that she is a Christian, and I believe that she makes a connection (or rather sees a disconnection) between raising tobacco and her faith. Jerry Bond told me at the 2007 Kentucky Folklife Festival, where he and his wife Kathleen served as representatives of tobacco farming families despite being retired, that since he’d quit raising tobacco he’d had conversations with other former tobacco farmers about the moral and religious dilemmas posed by raising the crop.<sup>114</sup>

Jerry has increasingly expressed discomfort with his role in the festival’s tobacco farming exhibit area (he’s worked in it every year of the festival), remarking that each

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<sup>114</sup> I will discuss the tobacco display at the festival in more detail in Chapter 5.

year he feels more and more like he has to defend tobacco heritage. He told me this during a narrative stage interview in 2005:

There was a time, there was a time when tobacco farmers were proud. And they were proud of their product, and they were proud of their work, and they were- a lot of little towns were built on tobacco farmers—money that tobacco made. But that pride doesn't exist any more. Tobacco farmers really have become second class citizens—a lot of people—and even today I noticed down there today [*at the tobacco farming tent*]. People come through and one woman said- I prob'ly shouldn't say this on the air- but she said, [*nasally voice*] “Well I guess they're gonna show us how to smoke it too” you know. And I thought “No, ma'am, That's not what we're about. We're only talkin' about the tradition of tobacco, and the impact it's had on Kentucky. I don't smoke and I don't encourage you to smoke. You know if you want to that's your choice.” But you know she was all up—she was all up in the air, over the fact that there was tobacco being displayed here at this festival. But we- It's just not a prideful thing anymore. You're almost like a drug dealer. [*slight laugh*] (9/15/05)

Although I did not witness the exchange he described, as a festival presenter I have watched both Jerry and visiting teachers negotiate the seeming contradictions of honoring tobacco as tradition and heritage at the festival, while back at school children are being taught about the dangers of tobacco use. As a folklorist in the tobacco tent, I became conscious that I, too, struggled with the same difficulties when faced with groups of school children. As Bond insinuates in his statement, “[t]hat's not what we're about. We're only talkin' about the tradition of tobacco,” tobacco use and the tradition of raising tobacco have been brought inexorably together by stigma. Bond and other farmers resist this move.

From a distinctly different perspective, there do remain farmers, mostly older men, who are not thoroughly convinced that tobacco use is as harmful as “they” (the government, the anti-tobacco lobby, the “health people”) would have us believe, and



there are more than a few farmers who—knowing what chemicals they are using and what the warning labels on those chemicals say, and knowing that companies blend in additional substances during the manufacturing process—blame the chemicals rather than (or more than) the plant. This was expressed in comments such as that when the speaker was young cancer just wasn't the problem it is to day; a couple of times I was told that Native Americans used tobacco long before whites without dying from cancer. Here, the stigma category is resisted at its core—stigma is denied through the denial of the harmful effects of the tobacco on users that led to tobacco stigma.

Most farmers with whom I worked, however, did not reject the core argument that tobacco is harmful to the health of users, but as I've said, most also did not express any sort of moral dilemma about raising tobacco.<sup>115</sup> Tobacco farmers who continue to raise tobacco—who choose to remain in the now-stigmatized category—continue to take pride in the category “tobacco farmer,” and they resist not their inclusion in the category, but the stigmatization of the category itself—the redefinition, or tarnishing, of the symbolism of the category “tobacco farmer” as well as the crop itself. Goffman provides a three-part answer to the question that is central to his book: “How does the stigmatized person respond to his situation?”: 1) by correcting his failing, 2) by making up for his failing or relearning, or 3) breaking “with what is called reality, and obstinately attempt[ing] to employ an unconventional interpretation of the character of his social identity” (10).

Goffman seems to suggest that the only option other than acquiescing to the underlying

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<sup>115</sup> Whether or not to continue to raise tobacco is actually a common topic of discussion among some tobacco farmers. The reasons that are cited for quitting are consistently: a shortage of labor, stagnant prices and rising costs, and just not wanting “to fool with it anymore.” I did not encounter instances in which either health effects or stigma was named as a reason why a farmer might consider quitting, with exceptions such as Jerry Bond and Kevan Evans who had already quit at the time of our interview.

basis of the stigma and proceeding from that point, is to break with reality. He does not recognize questioning the basis of the stigma as an option.

Tobacco stigma is neither consistently applied nor consistently perceived, in part as a result of it being a newly stigmatized category. The stigma continues to spread from non-tobacco regions to tobacco communities, in part through rhetorics of diversification and heritage that I will discuss in coming chapters. Not all tobacco farmers or former farmers express or acknowledge stigma; they are more apt to acknowledge the stigma that smokers face, and then relate that stigma to themselves because of the economic losses that are caused by declining rates of smoking.<sup>116</sup> This is more evidence of the inseparability of the crop from the uses of it.

Jerry Bond, quoted above, is one of the few male farmers with whom I spoke who raised the topics of morality and stigma, and I believe he was able and willing to do so because he no longer raises tobacco; he is no longer in the stigmatized category.<sup>117</sup> Women—regardless of whether tobacco continues to be raised on their farms—brought up the topics of both the stigma of raising tobacco and the underlying questions of the moral consequences much more frequently than did men. I am not arguing that women are more likely to have a moral opposition to raising tobacco or to feel the effects of stigma (although they may be), but that they raised the issue more often than men did and had more direct answers to my questions if I brought it up. Some, such as Valerie, raised

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<sup>116</sup> One of the questions I have been asked most frequently in informal conversations outside of Kentucky about my research is, “Do they smoke?” The vast majority of farmers I worked with in fact do not smoke; they are more apt to chew, but many do neither (many once smoked, chewed, or both and have quit). Certainly this serves in part as an acknowledgement of the ill health effects, but it also demonstrates their perspective that tobacco use is a “choice,” an argument that attempts to solve questions about their morality as growers (as I will discuss).

<sup>117</sup> Interestingly though, he chooses to put himself back into it at the festival; as a former tobacco farmer perhaps he will always bare a trace of the stigma anyway.

the issue in order to express frustrations with anti-tobacco discourses about a crop that had been the centerpiece of rural economies, while others raised it through the expression of their own moral qualms about the crop; those are the extremes. The opinion itself may nor may not be gendered but the act of raising the issue seems to be—probably because of the gendered relationships with the crop that I will discuss in Chapter 6.

Wives have commented to me that farmers ignore that kind of talk or are oblivious to it; Valerie Grigson told me, when I asked if her husband felt as strongly frustrated with the anti-tobacco campaigns as she does, that “farmers live in a bubble.” One extension agent commented to me that there’s a common “disassociation” from the “negative aspects” of the crop (as suggested by Jerry Bond’s attempt to disconnect the tradition of raising tobacco and the smoking of tobacco, above). As a folklorist, I am concerned with *expression* more than psychological processes suggested by “disassociation.” While male farmers may not directly address either the health consequences of the crop they raise or the stigma that has resulted, they express their opinions about it in other ways.

Noel Wise and I discussed anti-tobacco discourses, and when I asked him if he felt like the media made “judgments about tobacco farmers” he responded with this story:

I grew up- like most other people I grew up going to Sunday school and church every Sunday [...] When I was a youngster I remember that uh, particularly one elder in the church where I went to church that uh, they was debating about him being an elder because he was employed part time at a distillery. And they uh, made alcoholic beverages for sale and people got drunk and the, that was a terrible sin. And the tobacco farmers was about to kick this here distillery worker out of the church. Uh I think that’s turned around now, now you can drink that alcohol with no ill effects if you don’t overdo it. But now the smoking’s a sin.  
[*slight laugh*]

Through this narrative, a response to my question about feeling judged, Wise expressed his experience of moving from a position of power in the community to one in which his position is questioned; as a tobacco farmer he would have once been in a position to judge others, but now he is judged. Rather than the “shame” that Goffman suggests the stigmatized feel, Wise and other farmers express a loss of social and economic power—but also a continued sense of pride, the opposite of shame. Loss of pride is also expressed, as exemplified by Jerry Bond’s lengthy quote above. Yet, more often loss of pride is couched in concerns about changes in production and marketing practices than directly about stigma—issues that Bond explicitly connects and that I think are indeed connected if not always so explicitly. As I will discuss in another chapter, expressions about the loss of pride reflect nostalgia for a “golden age” of tobacco production—not necessarily a specific time period, but for the time in which fathers and grandfathers raised tobacco and were respected, and a period in which masculinity, power, and tobacco production were all linked; a period before “tobacco farmer” became a stigmatized category.

Most often, my questions regarding changing attitudes toward tobacco production resulted in comments about either the rights of smokers or one of several mantras of defense of raising tobacco that I will discuss in the next chapter. A common argument is that “people choose to smoke,” “I’m not telling anybody to smoke” (echoing the “smoking as a choice” rhetoric of the tobacco companies), and that smoking bans are not only anti-tobacco, but they also take away people’s choices. In a chapter to follow, I will discuss a defense of tobacco production that I have heard frequently, “it’s a legal crop,” a mantra that references a number of things (FDA regulation, lawsuits, etc.), but that also

suggests that farmers have been made to *feel* as though they are doing something immoral or even criminal, which can be understood as an acknowledgement of stigma, since certainly “criminal” is a thoroughly stigmatized category. While for outsiders the line between immoral and illegal may be gray (or non-existent) in regard to raising a harmful crop, there is a clear line for many tobacco farmers. One farmer told me “If they make it illegal I’ll quit raising it”; another told me a story of someone trying to convince him to grow marijuana on his land, and his refusal. Such instances demonstrate the importance to many of following the law, even as others judge their morality based on the crop they raise.<sup>118</sup> The frequent assertion that “it is a legal crop” serves as a defense in that it is an attempt to side-step the issue of whether or not it is “moral” to grow the crop, either because they themselves question the morality of growing an addictive, lethal crop, or because they know that is a battle they cannot win because tobacco’s morality has been impeached. They therefore use the unimpeached argument that it is “legal.”

Growers have also shared stories with me about situations in which direct comparisons were made between them and growers of illegal crops such as marijuana and opium poppies, comparisons which they found deeply offensive. For instance, Valerie Grigson told this story involving the comparison of tobacco with an illegal crop:

I had a um a preacher that we had in Sunday school we were talking one Sunday and, and my husband he really just was- you know started hearing all this so he’s like “maybe we aren’t supposed to be doing this” [...] And he, so he was asking the preacher and he was like “well do you think, do you think we’re doing the wrong thing?” and he’s like “well let me put it this way, if you come and ask you to help you milk the cows I will, but if you come and ask me to work in your tobacco I won’t.” And he was like- then he made some analogy to... something about a poppy field and heroin and I was like “Wait a minute. You’re not gonna

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<sup>118</sup> Of course, there most likely tobacco farmers who subsidize their income by growing marijuana, but I did not encounter such situations first hand.

tell me that us raising twenty acres of tobacco is the same thing as, selling heroin?  
how could you sit there and tell me that?”<sup>119</sup>

A similar example also involved judgments made by a preacher. In May 2008, Marlon Waits took me to see his plants beds (the Waits are the only family that I have worked with who still start some of their plants in the ground, and this was the first opportunity I had had to see plant beds). As we were getting back into his truck he pointed out his front license plate that says “Tobacco pays my bills.” I said I had been meaning to ask him about the plate, and he told me that he bought it at a farm equipment show. I asked what made him want to buy it and put it on his truck, and he said “Well it *does* pay my bills.” He immediately followed this with a story about bringing shocks of corn to his former wife’s church for their fall display. The preacher said “Now what do you do? What do you farm?” and he told him cattle and tobacco, and the preacher said to him “You know they’re talking about making that marijuana legal *too*.” Marlon described his outrage and said to me, in effect, “He grouped me with illegal crops! He grouped me with marijuana!”

The telling of this narrative in response to my question about why he has this license plate on his truck suggests that the license plate is a direct response to tobacco stigma and that he is aware of the stigma but refuses to accept it. This license plate might be described by Goffman as a “stigma symbol”: “a highly visible sign that advertises his failing wherever he goes” (100). Yet, of course, Marlon does not see tobacco farming as a *failing*, and he has made the choice to display the symbol, an active form of resistance to

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<sup>119</sup> Valerie’s statement that her husband was questioning whether or not they should be raising tobacco suggests the possibility that some farmers do discuss these issues in private, in contrast to the comments several wives (including Valerie) made about their husbands ignoring such questions.

the stigmatization of the category. He's arguing for a recovery, for a return to "normal" rather than a move to normal.

In addition to comparisons with illegal drugs, I frequently heard comparisons made between tobacco and alcohol. Some of these comparisons, like that of Noel Wise, argue that tobacco and alcohol have switched places in terms of social acceptance; others group alcohol and tobacco together as sins or vices. During the 2008 session of the Kentucky General Assembly, there was a major effort to increase the state tax on cigarettes, and the subject became a frequent topic of conversation during my fieldwork in January and February 2008. I asked Alice Baesler, who raises 300 acres of tobacco, how the discussion would have been different twenty years ago, and her reply is representative of many comments I heard from others,

Twenty years ago they woulda never even thought it. We were such a tobacco, state and tobacco-oriented and all. No- I mean no one would have even brought it up. But of course as, the health people and the tides have turned, uh, uh that's the thing to do- I mean to pick on tobacco because you you can pick on tobacco because *nobody likes tobacco*. So we can do that. We won't put it on bread because "oh my gosh" you know. And we won't put it on liquor. Because, everybody thinks that- Well to me liquor does as much damage to a family structure, or, it'll kill me and I didn't have anything to do with drinking it. You know, but that isn't taken into consideration because that's a thing that, *everybody does* [very low voice].<sup>120</sup>

She not only argues that tobacco has ceased to have the political power it once had, but like Noel Wise in the story above, she argues that tobacco and alcohol have exchanged places as the stigma surrounding alcohol lessens and tobacco stigma grows, despite what

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<sup>120</sup> Although attempts to raise the cigarette tax failed in 2008, they were successful in 2009. In both cases arguments about the impact of a tax increase on farmers and on Kentucky's agricultural economy were absent from the debate (unlike during past attempts), further suggesting how times have changed; tobacco farmers are no longer perceived as politically powerful enough to warrant mention.

she and others see as direct and dramatic dangers associated with alcohol. For instance, one argument that I have heard articulated a number of times is that *you don't wreck your car and kill someone from having one too many cigarettes*; the message is that cigarettes may be dangerous but not in an immediate way, and not to other people (although certainly the focus on the effects of second-hand smoke may dampen this argument eventually). According to John Berry, Jr.:

In twenty-eight years of practicing law I have had about every kind of case—both civil and criminal—that a country lawyer could. Most of them were related in some way to people's searches for contentment—i.e., drugs, alcohol, financial security, someone else's husband or wife. But during these twenty-eight years I have never had a case—civil or criminal—that was related in any way to the use of tobacco.

I have seen alcohol ruin careers, destroy marriages, break up families, and cause bankruptcy, fights, wrecks, spouse and child abuse, even murders. (Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association 131)

This comparison is a complex one because certainly it can be argued that there is a greater acceptance of alcohol in many communities—as, for instance, more and more Kentucky cities and counties that have historically been “dry” now allow alcohol sales—but there has also been a great deal of attention in recent decades to the dangers of alcohol, from drunk driving to its role in violence against women and children. This second argument, the dangers of alcohol, is often noted—along with the implicit argument that drinking alcohol is now more accepted than tobacco use, a contradiction that highlights the complexity of the various discourses about alcohol in American culture and in a rural religious culture like Kentucky's. Viewing these two vices side by side is particularly important because bourbon may now have an even stronger Kentucky association outside of the state than tobacco. Tourist activities such as the “Bourbon



Trail” of distillery tours across Central Kentucky are promoted by the state. Senator Jim Bunning of Kentucky sponsored a successful Senate resolution declaring September 2007 “National Bourbon Heritage Month” (“Celebrate ‘National Bourbon Heritage Month’”). Farmers such as Alice may be making an implicit comment about such state-supported promotions, as well as promotions by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, at the same time that continued tobacco production is virtually ignored. In addition to bourbon, Kentucky’s growing wine industry is being heavily promoted by the KDA as a symbol of a diversified agricultural economy.<sup>121</sup>

In an additional reflection of the complexity and inherent contradictions of the stigma, some of those I interviewed grouped alcohol and tobacco into the same or similar category. A retired warehouseman and grower told me that he quit both alcohol and tobacco, that moderation is the key to both, and that both are really about the choices that people have the right to make. Another former grower told me at one point in our interview that he did not think tobacco is as bad for you as “they” say it is; later in the interview he remarked with pride that as a religious man he never drank or smoked; still later he told me that it’s crazy that “they” are trying to make Kentucky smoke-free because that’s what “we grow.” These are the contradictions in the stigma, as growers and others pull from multiple discourses that seem to contradict one another (see Cameron 157).

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<sup>121</sup> According to the KDA there are 113 grape producers and 46 wineries in Kentucky (“Grape and Wine Program”). This seemingly new industry, however, is not safe from heritage discourses. The messages around the growing industry inform consumers that “Kentucky has a long and distinguished place in the history of American wine making. Kentucky’s first vineyard was planted in 1798 in the rolling hills of the Kentucky bluegrass” (“Kentucky Wine”).

A theme that has run throughout this chapter is the role of the church and religion in tobacco stigma. Questions of tobacco morality and stigma often show up in church-related stories and contexts, and clearly the church serves as a site of moral judgment that is directly connected to stigma, as noted above in my discussion of stories of a farmer who stopped raising it because “he’s a Christian,” or the farmer who told me he didn’t drink or smoke because “he’s a Christian.” These questions have presented a dilemma for Kentucky churches as well, a dilemma that a group of pastors and others responded to directly through workshops and publications designed to assist clergy during the tobacco “crisis” of the 1990s (Poage 102). These workshops, held in 1991 and 1994, were geared toward clergy of “tobacco churches,” and each was followed by the publication of a manual based on the presentations made at the workshop. A fairly well-known term in Kentucky, a “tobacco church” is defined in the 1994 manual as “any congregation, rural, small town or county seat, where the economy supporting that church and community gains its primary energy from growing, processing and/or marketing tobacco” (Poage 1).<sup>122</sup> This effort acknowledged that “[t]he use of tobacco is a controversial issue that forces politicians from tobacco-growing states to defend the economic base for farmers” (iii) and “this manual takes the unique stance of neither supporting nor condemning the social use of tobacco, but rather seeks to put the reader into the head and shoes of the tobacco-grower—THE FAMILY FARMER” (1). A major strategy of the manual, then, is to normalize the tobacco grower, as the organizers asked participants to “listen and learn before judging” (iii); the authors attempt to disconnect the crop and those who raise

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<sup>122</sup> In addition, when the tobacco program was still in existence, churches often owned quotas, usually because when land was purchased for the church a quota was attached. In many cases members of the congregation raised the tobacco quota as a means of raising money for the church (like the schools mentioned above).

it from the use of the product and to return “tobacco farmers” to the broad category of “family farmers,” a valued rather than stigmatized category. Presentations printed in the manual range from descriptive pieces about rural church communities, to a historical overview of tobacco, and calls for churches to become active in helping farmers through the crisis.

Such responses to stigma, more formal than the expressions of individual farmers or ministers, have taken place in political arenas as well, such as the organization of Bluegrass Agriculture Tours by the Council for Burley Tobacco. These tours (which ceased in 2005 because of changes in federal lobbying laws) brought congressional aids from around the country to Kentucky tobacco farms so that aids could gain an understanding of tobacco culture and tobacco farmers. The Executive Director of the Council described the impact he saw on one congressional aid from a non-tobacco state:

...I think we truly opened his eyes up as to what it means to this state that, our tobacco farmers are farmers just like farmers in his state, they're just growing a different crop, they're not out here trying to promote uh, kids to smoke, or promoting smoking- we're raising a legal crop, and I think that's probably the big change you'll see is they they identify, they put a face on it. (Wallace 7/13/00)

Clearly, one purpose of these tours was to “put a face on” or—in Goffman’s terms—to “normalize” the tobacco farmer, in order to ensure that congressional aids would have these farmers, who are “just like farmers in his state,” in mind when working with their congressional representatives on tobacco legislation. However, this is also about categories; the Council was attempting to show congressional aids that despite the stigma of tobacco-the-crop and tobacco-the-industry, tobacco farmers remain in the “farmer” category. Similarly, a number of efforts to bring health advocates and tobacco farmers

together in the 1990s were based on the rhetorical strategy of promoting face-to-face interaction in order to persuade health advocates that farmers whose primary cash crop was tobacco maintain a position in the “normal” category of “farmer.”<sup>123</sup> Both the Bluegrass Ag Tours and the negotiations between farmers and health advocates have now ended.

Even as such discourses attempt to categorize tobacco farmers as “family farmers” in order to put forward a more acceptable face, many tobacco farmers in fact distance themselves from other kinds of farmers, embracing the identity of *tobacco farmer* (even as most raise beef cattle and forages to support them). I will deal with issues of diversification in a later chapter, but it is important to point out here that there is a growing distance between farmers who continue to raise tobacco and those who are moving to new crops, particularly vegetables, and actively joining the larger movements focused on sustainability and “eating local.” This widening gap can be understood as based on stigma, but not only tobacco stigma—a stigma based on adherence to tradition, or a perceived unwillingness to try new things.

Amy Shuman has pointed out that folklorists are uniquely prepared to deal with the issues of stigma because the very category “folk” is a stigmatized one, one that we, as a discipline, are actively working to recover.<sup>124</sup> This is the stigma at the center of the gap between tobacco farmers and vegetable farmers; this growing gap is based on a dichotomy of traditional versus modern, a dichotomy that folklorists have both helped to

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<sup>123</sup> Of course questions might also be raised about whether farmers generally can be categorized as fully “normal” as they become increasingly unusual in a post-agricultural society. Like others traditionally regarded as members of “folk” classes, there is a degree of stigma attached to all farmers.

<sup>124</sup> I refer here to comments made by Shuman in her role as discussant of the panel “Performing the Stigmatized Vernacular: Difference, Discreditation, Resignification, and the Folk” at the American Folklore Society annual meeting, Louisville, Kentucky, October 25, 2008.

create and maintain and have worked hard to disassemble throughout our disciplinary history. At times, tobacco farmers are stigmatized in larger agricultural contexts for their refusal to “see the writing on the wall”—for their refusal to give in to the perception that the tobacco market is a disappearing market, a dying economy—and they need to diversify away from this traditional crop and way of life *now* before it is too late.

In this brief chapter, I have attempted to describe the stigmatization of the category of “tobacco farmer” and the expressive responses of tobacco farmers to stigma. These responses range from agreement with the underlying basis of the stigma, to a variety of means of trying to come to terms with, manage, and resist stigma. The chapters that follow will build on this discussion of stigma, as I describe additional factors that have contributed to the stigmatization of the category and continue to look to the expressive responses of farmers next to public discourses about tobacco production.

## CHAPTER 5: Institutional and Vernacular Tobacco Heritage

In a previous chapter, I examined the Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter as a site that demonstrates the rhetorical movement of tobacco from principal cash crop to venerated heritage perceived to be under threat, to its near complete erasure from the pages of this state-supported publication. In this chapter, I examine multiple rhetorics of heritage surrounding tobacco in order to understand the deployment of the heritage label in different periods and contexts. I briefly review core scholarship on the concept of “heritage” and then consider the ways in which current heritage theory plays out in tobacco discourses and the ways that this case study suggests the need for further theory. Following this, I examine institutional heritage rhetorics and those of tobacco farmers and agricultural extension agents as offered to me during my ethnographic fieldwork in the region, arguing that as tobacco has become increasingly threatened, heritage discourses have been deployed in its defense. I argue that the “heritage” label served as a means of attempting to recover the historical and symbolic importance of tobacco to the Kentucky economy through the creation of a consciousness of tobacco farming as a “way of life.” However, not only was this attempted recovery largely a failure, but heritage served as a primary agent in the erasure of tobacco production from perceptions and definitions of present day Kentucky agriculture and awareness of the continued economic import of this cash crop to many farmers.

Just as there are multiple perspectives on the future of tobacco production, there are, I argue, multiple heritage discourses. While particular heritage discourses resulted in what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls exhibitions as “second life,” “heritage” in particular display contexts and discursive expressions honors the production of a crop that has long provided and continues to provide an income for over 8100 present day Kentucky farmers. I will describe such displays and the discourses of tobacco farmers and argue that rather than providing a “second life” for tobacco, such displays and related discourses attempt to recover respect for the crop and those who raise it from the cloak of stigma that now enshrouds them; such displays and discourses both honor tobacco’s history and acknowledge the continuation of tobacco farming’s first life.

### **Tobacco “Heritage”**

A 2003 editorial lamented, “They tell us change is good, and we generally don’t shy from it. But when change causes the demise of a tradition, it’s a sad thing. Tobacco is not the most politically correct crop in the world, but it is such a huge part of our history and heritage...” (“A silent auction”). Here tobacco is described as a dead tradition, killed off by change; by the next sentence the stigma now associated with the crop is referenced and tobacco is relabeled “heritage,” calling forth Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s definition of heritage as “the transvaluation of the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct” (“Theorizing Heritage” 369).

There is a growing literature by scholars in a range of fields on the concept of heritage. This literature provides a critique of the “production” of heritage, the “heritage industry,” and the very term “heritage,” at the same time that there is a continued

explosion of “heritage tourism” efforts by chambers of commerce, tourism departments, and other such entities (often but not always led by folklorists and other cultural specialists). Such efforts include not only museums, but the creation of “heritage corridors,” “heritage driving tours,” and “heritage parks.”<sup>125</sup> Robert Hewison examines the growth of public and private heritage museums in Great Britain, which he describes as “gripped by the perception that it is in decline” (9). He argues that heritage is a response to modernization, in which “everything had become more and more the same” (39); the past, increasingly in Great Britain the *industrial* past, came to be seen as a better place as compared to the present state of decline.

James Abrams provides a useful critique of the growing role of government in heritage preservation, taking as his example struggles taking place in “documentary landscapes” that tell the stories of western Pennsylvania coal towns. Abrams makes an argument that echoes in many ways the warnings against the homogenized local made by Amy Shuman (“Dismantling Local Culture”) and Dorothy Noyes, stating that in cultural conservation efforts “we must listen carefully for popular accents of gender, class, and ethnicity, which circulate and proliferate in response and resistance to the representational priorities of the state” (25). Abrams argues that “the concept of heritage strikes me as an ideologically charged textualizing practice intended, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to mediate and reimpose order on the destabilizing forces of culture change” (25).

In his consideration of the construction of heritage, David Brett examines the historical construction of the concept of “heritage”—like Hewison, defining it as a

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<sup>125</sup> In Kentucky, among the many such heritage projects are “More than Music: A Heritage Driving Tour of Kentucky’s Route 23” (the “Country Music Highway”) and the “Kentucky Lincoln Heritage Trail.”



response to modernization—as well as the physical construction of heritage in particular heritage displays. He evaluates the spatial and architectural rhetoric of five “popular history” or heritage sites in Ireland, examining each in terms of visualization, simulation, and narrative topology, and ends with a brief discussion of his recommendations for the designers of future displays heritage. In contrast to Hewison, who argues that heritage arises as a response to decline, and Abrams, who sees heritage as a form of repair in a period of “social transformation” (25), Brett insists that heritage emerges in “context[s] of national or local self-aggrandisement” as opposed to or in addition to—he is noncommittal—periods of decline (10).

Related and more recent scholarship considers the application of intellectual property rights to intangible cultural heritage, resulting in questions of who owns culture/tradition/heritage. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett recounts the history of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the creation of the category of protection known as “intangible heritage,” modeled on their categories of tangible and natural heritage (“Intangible Heritage”). This entailed a shift from artifacts to people rather than to total systems, an emphasis on lists of valuable tradition bearers rather than on the total circumstances in which traditions exist. It also resulted in the creation of a bureaucracy of experts with specialized skills related to the safeguarding of intangible heritage that are completely different from the skills needed to perform the cultural practices that have been labeled “intangible heritage.” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that a resulting “possession of heritage—as opposed to the way of life that heritage safeguards—is an instrument of modernization” (“Intangible Heritage” 61).

Dorothy Noyes considers the attempts of UNESCO and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) to determine who owns (who has the right to represent and to benefit from the sale of) traditional culture. Noyes, with the Patum of Berga as a prime example, demonstrates that within communities there are power dynamics at play that determine which of many internal voices has the power to ultimately be heard. She warns that those that are making decisions from positions several levels removed from local cultures have no way of understanding what's happening on the ground. To UNESCO, the answer appears to be that as long as a local voice is being heard than traditional culture is "protected"; yet, as Noyes demonstrates, this is a long way from any kind of solution to the preservation of local heritage.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's work on heritage displays is perhaps the most central of the folklore scholarship on the topic, particularly her 1998 Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage, in which she critiques the exhibition of people, places, and objects in the name of heritage. In an earlier article, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett called for the theorizing of heritage, arguing that "we are actively 'producing' heritage...Whereas we have tended to focus on that which counts as heritage, much remains to be done on the instruments for producing heritage" ("Theorizing Heritage" 379). Destination Culture is her full-length examination of heritage production, in which she looks at specific sites and texts—the exhibition of Jews at various World's Fairs, an African art exhibit in New York City, Plimouth Plantation, Ellis Island, writings on "taste," and "objects of ethnography"—and asks questions about the production of heritage, difference, and virtuality.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also considered questions of heritage in a 1998 article that examines the Klezmer revival as a “phenomenon [related] to what Haim Soloveitchik has called the end of self-evident Jewishness” (“Sounds” 50). Soloveitchik argued that the result of the end of self-evident Jewishness that began in the mid-1950s was Orthodoxy; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that heritage is another result, in this case a genre of “heritage music.” Here, she examines the “second life” of Klezmer through the lens of heritage as she has developed it, heritage as “a mode of cultural production that gives the disappearing and gone a second life as an exhibit of itself” (“Sounds” 52).

These critiques all understand heritage as an attempt to revive local economies in crisis through “manufacturing heritage” instead of goods (Hewison 9). According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, heritage “depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves” (“Sounds” 7). These critiques of heritage share a focus on heritage as “produced” *by* institutions about people, places, and objects *for* the consumption of others, namely tourists. They are concerned with preservation and display as experienced by the implied and imagined tourists rather than, with the notable exceptions of Noyes and Abrams, the experiences or voices of the people and places represented.

The heritage literature has focused exclusively on a new usage of the term “heritage,” as a label applied by heritage professionals to cultural resources perceived to be in danger; unacknowledged, is that the term has prior meanings and such meanings continue to influence the usage of the term in everyday language. It was not until around 1970 that usage to mean “Characterized by or pertaining to the preservation or exploitation of local and national features of historical, cultural, or scenic interest, esp. as

tourist attractions” had firmly taken hold (“Heritage”). For centuries, the term heritage was used to refer to inheritances, both tangible and intangible, that are perceived as rights granted by birth, such as culture, folklore, values, belief systems, history, ways of living, and of course possessions and land.<sup>126</sup> While I am not questioning the import of the approach to heritage of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and others, I am suggesting that we need to also examine the continued usage of the term with prior definitions in mind. Such an examination raises questions about how current usage in daily discourses has been influenced by new usages, and how different usages may serve disparate purposes.

Kentucky “tobacco heritage” is a prime case study for examining these varying usages and attempting to understand their differing meanings and functions because examples of tobacco heritage do not all fit neatly into heritage theory. For example, while certainly heritage has been “produced” surrounding Kentucky tobacco, a tourism industry has not grown up around the crop or its production; in Kentucky there are currently no tobacco museums, tobacco heritage trails, or other tourist attractions devoted specifically to tobacco.<sup>127</sup> According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “[h]eritage is created through a process of exhibition” (“Theorizing Heritage” 369) which results in “a second life [for those things now understood to be heritage] as exhibits of themselves” (“Theorizing Heritage” 370). In Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s understanding of heritage, that

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<sup>126</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary provides multiple definitions of the term, including the inheritances of property as used for instance in Shakespeare’s 1608 *Pericles*: “It was...part of my heritage, Which my dead father did bequeath to me,” as well as “That which comes from the circumstances of birth; an inherited lot or portion; the condition or state transmitted from ancestors” as used for instance by British philosopher John Frederick Denison Maurice in 1874: “To earn bread by the sweat of the brow is the common heritage of the sons of Adam.” (“Heritage”)

<sup>127</sup> In June 2009, I learned of plans underway by a group of volunteers in Owen County, Kentucky, to create a tobacco heritage trail in that county in order to preserve tobacco barns and honor tobacco history. This “trail” will be composed of murals painted on tobacco barns throughout the county depicting tobacco work (burning beds, setting, housing, cutting); a CD of excerpts from interviews the group is conducting with farmers will lead visitors through the county.

which has been labeled heritage is defunct; it no longer has a use in the lives of those for whom it was once tradition. This is not the case with tobacco heritage, which has long existed simultaneously with the continued production of tobacco. As I will discuss, not only are heritage discourses not restricted to display sites, but particular heritage rhetorics are often deployed by those who still raise tobacco and those who argue that tobacco continues to have an important role to play in the agricultural economy of Kentucky. Although there are far fewer tobacco farmers than there once were, tobacco production continues its *first* life for many farmers.

In his work on nostalgia and material culture in Northern Ireland, Ray Cashman makes the important point that “not all nostalgias are the same” (154), separating “grassroots” (137) nostalgia from larger public discourses of nostalgia that have been considered by scholars as conservative forces (including Hewison). Briefly noting the similarity between his conception of nostalgia and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s of “heritage,” Cashman suggests that like nostalgias, all heritages might not be the same (156, fn 7). Picking up Cashman’s suggestion, I am interested in understanding heritage in its multiple forms. Although Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s theory of heritage production can in part be seen in the move of tobacco to heritage, tobacco provides a key site for the understanding of multiple heritages including but not limited to heritage as second life and as industry.<sup>128</sup>

James F. Abrams, in his examination of heritage displays in western Pennsylvania coal towns, distinguishes between two types of documentary landscapes, “[i]nstitutional representations of industrial history” and *vernacular* landscapes created in homes, bars,

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<sup>128</sup> While I will touch on “nostalgia” in this chapter because as Cashman notes, “clearly heritage and nostalgia go hand in hand,” I will treat nostalgia in greater detail later in this dissertation (156 fn. 7).

and parks, usually mediated by a former miner (29 *emphasis mine*). Much as Cashman proposed multiple nostalgias, Abrams suggests that not all expressions of heritage are the same, and urges us to look for points of divergence among these expressions of heritage, as well as the ways in which “[t]he vernacular continuously and actively scans the institutional for regulated silences, voicing allegiance to lived collective experience through the embodied memory of a ‘witness’” (29). His focus is the “struggle for collective memory” that plays out in these competing forms of heritage and the need for examining heritage discourses as sites of contestation in order to avoid the sanctioning of a particular heritage above others.

In this chapter, I will apply Abrams’ distinction between institutional and vernacular heritage to tobacco heritage, but not in order to understand a “struggle for collective memory.” Instead, I will demonstrate that institutional heritage served to force tobacco production into the past; vernacular voices invoke the messages of institutional expressions in order to turn them on their head, using them to insist “we’re still here.” Expressions of vernacular tobacco heritage, by calling on prior meanings of the term, insist that tobacco is not only a central element of a shared history, but that tobacco is an inheritance that remains economically important in the present.

I will use *institutional heritage* to refer to the heritage that has thus far been the focus of heritage scholarship: display as “second life” produced by public and private entities primarily for consumption by outsiders such as tourists; it includes implicit and explicit arguments that the first life of that which is now heritage is gone or will soon be. In the case of tobacco heritage, such discourses have been deployed by both the tobacco industry and the state. For instance, the performance of a museum theatre piece that

reenacts the work involved in the production of tobacco (work that still continues) in the cadence of the call of the tobacco auctioneer (a thing of the past) is one example of institutional heritage.<sup>129</sup> I examine heritage-related discourses and displays deployed by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, along with those of tobacco companies and tobacco industry organizations such as the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association, the Council for Burley Tobacco, and the Burley Auction Warehouse Association. While the particulars of the shifts in tobacco's meanings that I traced in the KDA News are unique to the KDA and the pictures that it sought to paint for its own rhetorical purposes in different periods, in a general sense the shifts in the KDA News tell the story of the larger cultural shifts in tobacco's symbolic meanings. This is in part because the KDA reports on not only their own activities but those of others, but also because in the pages of the KDA News the state is responding to the discourses that are taking place outside of their pages, and we can therefore make inferences about the discourses of the times from their responses.

In contrast to institutional heritage discourses, expressions of *vernacular heritage* communicate a self-conscious recognition of the historic value of traditional cultural practices without a resignation that such practices no longer have a function and are destined only to second life. Vernacular heritage is expressed by tradition bearers and others in their communities through events, displays, and everyday discourses. Take, for instance, a blanket hanging on the wall of a county office of the Kentucky Cooperative

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<sup>129</sup> "Tobacco's Tale: From Bed to Basket," a 5-minute museum theatre piece performed regularly at the Kentucky History Center, was written and is performed by Greg Hardison. Importantly, the script for this piece was written, and it began to be performed, in 2000, a time in which tobacco auctions were understood to be in their final days. Despite my labeling of it as "institutional heritage" it is as an excellent theatre piece that offers important historical context to visitors to the museum.

Extension Service, with images depicting the major steps in tobacco production—from seed bed to manufacture—and the words “Tobacco Our Heritage” in the center. Through the chosen images and the inclusion of “heritage,” this blanket references the past in the context of the workspace of county agriculture agents who act as advocates for tobacco farmers in the present. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, heritage “depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves” (Destination Culture 7). The tobacco economy is indeed widely understood as a dying economy; yet, while this and other expressions of tobacco heritage may provide a “second life,” the first life of tobacco production continues to hang on.

Why, then, call on the past in this contemporary arena? How does the “heritage” label, applied to tobacco farming, serve the interests of county agriculture agents and farmers? What value, if any, is added to the tobacco economy through this display? Although these images too, reference the past, the context is the workspace of those who work with tobacco farmers on a daily basis and see themselves as advocates for farmers, including tobacco farmers. Interviews I conducted in these offices focused in large part on tobacco as a continuing source of income for many Kentucky farmers. “Heritage” in this vernacular display context honors a way of life centered on a crop that, although now cloaked in stigma, has long provided *and continues to provide* an income for farming families. This “way of life” became self-conscious through institutional heritage discourses, but through expressions of vernacular heritage the removal of tobacco from the present is resisted.

Both institutional and vernacular heritage are rooted in the defense of tobacco against ensuing threats, and here tobacco is no different from other types of “heritage.”



According to David Brett, heritage is a response to the “process of modernization [which] by eroding customs and expectations, forces us to rearticulate our sense of the past” (8), and the “stress” of “one social ‘habitus’ being replaced by another” creates a “preoccupation with the past” (15). He quotes historian and curator Sir Roy Strong who noted that “It is in times of danger, either from without or from within, that we become deeply conscious of our heritage” (46). The use of the heritage label as a response to threat is perhaps most obvious in instances such as the designation of “World Heritage Sites” by UNESCO in order to safeguard “cultural and natural heritage” (UNESCO)<sup>130</sup> or the work of the Heritage Foundation, an organization that proclaims on their website: “As conservatives, we believe the values and ideas that motivated our Founding Fathers are worth conserving” (“About the Heritage Foundation”)—the implication being that these values and ideas are threatened and require conservation efforts.

While tobacco heritage is similar to other deployments of heritage because it has been used in a situation of threat, tobacco provides an opportunity to look at the deployment of heritage in the context of a particular threat: the creation of a newly stigmatized category. Although stigma can be understood as simply the particular threat posed to tobacco, prompting heritage as a response, stigma is unique in that it forces self-consciousness in ways that other shifts to heritage do not. Tobacco’s “second life” of exhibition and valoration began in the 1950s as evidence of the ill health effects of tobacco use mounted and it continued throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, reaching its apex in the 1980s and early 90s. Although through my examples, I do not attempt to construct a chronology of tobacco heritage, distinctly different attitudes about

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<sup>130</sup> See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (“Intangible Heritage”) and Noyes.

tobacco in particular periods resulted in the introduction of tobacco as (institutional) heritage and an evolution of the meanings and functions of tobacco heritage over time. Tobacco displays increased in number as tobacco stigma grew and then began to decline as it became clear that institutional heritage could not recover tobacco from stigma, and tobacco has become increasingly perceived as a heritage that is fully in the past rather than a “living heritage.” This is where the distinctions between institutional and vernacular heritage become ever more important: institutional heritage has contributed to the ushering of tobacco into the past and contributed to the spread of the stigma from the industry to farmers, while expressions of vernacular heritage resist these results and attempt to recover it.

### **Tobacco on Exhibit: From Self-Evident to Self-Conscious**

Before examining specific examples of institutional and vernacular heritage, I must make a distinction between Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s “objects of ethnography”—which she defines as “artifacts created by the ethnographer,” decontextualized and put on display (Destination Culture 17)—and objects displayed (and sometimes created) by non-ethnographers, including tradition bearers. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Display is an interface that mediates and thereby transforms what is shown into heritage” (Destination Culture 7). Not all forms of display accomplish this; tobacco has a long history of display, preceding tobacco-as-heritage.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, tobacco production has multiple aesthetic dimensions including the judging of a farmer’s tobacco by graders and buyers as well as other farmers at the time of sale. But in addition to the functional display of

tobacco in the context of production and sale, tobacco has been put on exhibit in other contexts for the purposes of display and judging since at least the 1930s but probably much earlier, as evidenced by stories in the KDA News about tobacco exhibits at county fairs as well as the state fair. At such fairs, children and adults exhibited their best tobacco—green and on the stick as well as cured and tied in hands—alongside their best fresh vegetables, cakes and pies, home-canned goods, home-sewn items, and other material culture from daily life. In her study of the Midwestern county fair, Leslie Prosterman argues that at the county fair, people exhibit their images of themselves and their values through the display of materials from their daily lives—from cattle to pickles. According to Prosterman, “In effect, the county fair recontextualizes everyday life through the exhibition process. It takes work out of one place into another and by this act requests a new kind of notice. That notice in turn grants consciousness to the work within the home, barn, or studio” (188).

Although, as Prosterman argues, such displays bring a consciousness to the fruits of rural labor that is lacking in daily life, this consciousness is different from the self-consciousness that accompanies a move to heritage. State and county fair displays are intended for members of the community, those assumed to have the same aesthetics and values, rather than for outsiders; this is most clearly evidenced by a lack of contextualizing information such as the signage and labeling that are obligatory in museum display. Such vernacular displays are a celebration of a bountiful harvest and a show of pride in raising a “pretty” crop of tobacco; they are a chance to show the fruits of one’s labor to other insiders with similar values and aesthetics, rather than a display of heritage for outsiders.

Similarly, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, taking family photographs in the tobacco crop each year has long been a common form of vernacular documentation. According to Extension Agent Keenan Bishop, "...you look through the family albums and you see, you know pictures of kids' birthdays and Christmases and tobacco crops." I was shown such photos by some farmers, as well as photos taken throughout the season and at tobacco warehouses. These photos, like exhibits at the fair, are intended not for public consumption but for family viewing; they too are a celebration of group aesthetics and a successful crop.

These are two examples of vernacular display that have long been a part of tobacco farming communities, and are not a result of the valorization of tobacco as central to Kentucky's heritage. Yet, such vernacular displays have changed as heritage rhetorics were increasingly deployed and new levels of self-consciousness about tobacco heritage were introduced. For instance, despite the fact that tobacco has been marketed in bales for nearly thirty years, tobacco exhibits continue to feature tobacco tied in hands. In the case of the Kentucky State Fair, in order for young farmers who have never tied a hand of tobacco to prepare their tobacco for display, the Cooperative Extension Service provides detailed step-by-step instructions, with photographs, of tying a hand of tobacco as part of their informational piece "Preparing Entries for the 4H Tobacco Exhibit" (Pearce "Preparing Entries"). Here, we see a self-conscious embracing of defunct tradition—the closest we might get to "revival" of tobacco traditions, now heritage, as new generations must be taught what was once part of tradition but is now a skill that no longer has a function beyond performance and display. Hands of tobacco are now tied only in performative contexts which include not only display events such as the fair, but

informal performance events in stripping rooms in order to show both younger generations and outsiders (such as folklorists) “the way we used to do it.”<sup>131</sup>

Family photos, too, have been recontextualized as heritage display. One example is Phyllis Bailey’s self-published book, Shelby Tobacco Farmers: A Pictorial History, which includes photographs and reminiscences that Bailey gathered from farm families throughout Shelby County. These pictures chronicle several decades of tobacco farming in the county in both snapshots of tobacco work and posed photographs, including a large number of photographs of families posing in their tobacco patches. Although it can be argued that Bailey published this book with the local community in mind, much of the text provides descriptions of tobacco production that make the book and the tradition comprehensible to outsiders. Her intended audience may be Shelby County residents, but outsiders can also enter this re-presentation of local tradition in book form. Taking these photos out of traditional contexts and publishing them with explanatory text results in tradition recontextualized as heritage.

The movement from vernacular display for insiders to display in heritage contexts demonstrates a move from self-evident to self-conscious. Once tobacco was no longer simply a self-evident economic farming tradition—a tradition that was accepted as “part and parcel of a way of life” in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s words (“Sounds” 52)—self-consciousness set in. Self-consciousness about tobacco-as-heritage grew as tobacco became a threatened crop and livelihood, through the stigma increasingly associated with it after the release of the Surgeon General’s report as well as the expansion of foreign

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<sup>131</sup> As I described in Chapter 2, Martin Henson tied a hand of tobacco for me when we were stripping tobacco together (that hand is now displayed in my office); many other farmers showed me how to tie a hand of tobacco in order to demonstrate how it was once done.

tobacco production, as tobacco provided an ever-shrinking percentage of the farm income. What had once simply been a way of life began to be *described as* a way of life once it was threatened. For example, according to tobacco farmer Judy Miller, “Well tobacco as a kid and even as [an adult] was a way of life, it was uh, not just a vocation it was a complete way of life,” and former tobacco farmer Madonna Hinton told me, “Tobacco’s just the way of life in this area.” As it became harder to deny the health effects of tobacco use, heritage discourses based on tobacco as “a way of life” became ubiquitous.

Self-consciousness about tobacco can be seen not only in the shifting contexts of vernacular displays, but in new types of displays. The 1955 exhibit described in the KDA News under the headline “Tobacco samples become museum pieces,” in which graded hands of tobacco were displayed in the state museum, provides a transition point, as tobacco was put on display for insiders as well as outsiders to the tradition in a move by the state to claim vernacular knowledge of grading tobacco. This was followed by the display of representations of the tobacco plant that symbolically recontextualized tobacco as heritage. So although tobacco itself has long been put on display, the putting on display of *representations* of tobacco serve as a marker of a new self-consciousness of tobacco’s importance; mimetic display signals the end of self-evident tobacco tradition and a move to tobacco as heritage.

### **Institutional Heritage Displays: A “Second Life” for Tobacco**

The display of representations of tobacco also preceded the move to tobacco as heritage. Some farmers express pride in the fact that tobacco leaves adorn columns in the U.S.

Capitol; tobacco leaves appear in the seals of several cities, the masthead of the KDA News between 1954 and 1969, and other such places. The reproduction of tobacco leaves in these symbolic spaces reflects a consciousness of tobacco's economic importance, but not necessarily its heritage. These examples were produced at a time and in places in which tobacco's economic importance was both self-evident and widespread. Simply stated, tobacco leaves in such places require that the viewer recognize them, while heritage displays include contextualizing information and "interpretative strategies" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett Destination Culture 21). The self-consciousness of tobacco heritage can instead be found in a second form of mimetic display, that which argues that tobacco is "a way of life" through the depiction of tobacco landscapes and typical scenes of tobacco work rather than simply tobacco as a commodity crop.

Here, I will provide examples of the production of institutional heritage, focusing on artistic renderings of tobacco as "a way of life," tobacco-related publications and exhibitions, and tobacco in festival contexts. Such productions have been deployed by both the tobacco industry—including tobacco companies and lobbying organizations—and state and local governmental institutions. Such heritage discourses created a new consciousness about burley tobacco production as a way of life that was central to the identity of the Commonwealth of Kentucky; at the same time, these discourses rhetorically recategorized tobacco production as part of Kentucky's past.

### *The Tobacco "Way of Life" Becomes Art*

In my analysis of the KDA News, I noted that a story about the Council for Burley Tobacco's 1974 release of a "Burley heritage print" marked the first instance I could

document in the newsletter of the use of the word “heritage” to describe tobacco. The print was “developed because there was relatively little art available that was symbolic of the heritage of the burley tobacco industry and its far-reaching effects” (August 1974, 6); this print, depicting a tobacco field and a barn, served as the first of many such prints.<sup>132</sup> Paintings and drawings of tobacco landscapes as well as tobacco work—such as burning tobacco beds or hanging tobacco in the barn, as well as serial depictions of the entire crop year from seed bed to housing to auction—have become ubiquitous in homes and offices.<sup>133</sup> In 1976, the state embraced tobacco symbolism as part of the picture of Kentucky heritage in a print that commemorates the American bicentennial. This print featured a drawing of the state capitol building overlaid with the seal of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, with a drawing in each corner, including a tobacco field and barn, as well as images such as a thoroughbred horse racing on a track. The heritage argument is made through an assemblage of symbols.

In her essay about the Museum for African Art’s inaugural exhibit, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asks, “How does art conceal and reveal secret knowledge?” (Destination Culture 251). She goes on to describe an exhibit in which objects stand in for the secrets that they do not reveal, and yet the question is relevant in thinking about the introduction of tobacco-as-art. In this case, the Council for Burley Tobacco and later creators of mimetic displays of tobacco are attempting to reveal the “secrets” of farmers

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<sup>132</sup> The introduction of these prints can also be understood as a rhetorical shift from “land” to “landscape.” As Gregory Clark argues, “*Land* becomes *landscape* when it is assigned the role of symbol, and as symbol it functions rhetorically” (9). In my introduction I mentioned nostalgia for the fading tobacco landscape—disappearing tobacco fields and collapsing tobacco barns. This can be understood as *heritage landscape* and the mourning of its perceived passing as part of the rhetorical discourse that argues that tobacco is going.

<sup>133</sup> However, I have yet to see a visual depiction of tobacco work that includes the newer float beds and greenhouses in place of the old seed beds, and often the work in the field is being done with the aid of a horse or mule rather than a tractor; the period being honored by tobacco heritage is “the old days.”



in order to persuade audiences to understand tobacco production as a “way of life” and, like the exhibit at the Museum for African Art, such depictions, when presented in institutional heritage contexts, rely on “[l]ucid text panels and labels” to turn life into art (Destination Culture 251). As stigma around tobacco production grew, what had long been central to Kentucky—economically and culturally—was threatened by the prospect of being moved to the margins. As Brett argues, “Typically a ‘peripheral’ area or country is designated as picturesque or sublime by visitors from a metropolitan ‘centre’” (39). In order to translate tobacco as a way of life to Kentuckians and others for whom tobacco production was becoming peripheral, tobacco heritage had to be put on display as art. These depictions are mimetic displays of not only tobacco-the-commodity-crop, but tobacco as a “way of life” to be celebrated as heritage.

As early as the 1920s, tobacco companies “attempted quiet ‘educational’ campaigns, such as National Tobacco Week, with exhibitions showing processes, and charts indicating the place of tobacco in the national economic life” (B. Roberts 251-252). It is no surprise that the tobacco companies would be actively promoting the industry at this time, for it was a tumultuous period for the tobacco industry, as prices had dropped dramatically following a spike during the First World War, and tobacco farmers were forming cooperative marketing associations in order to negotiate for higher prices. It was not until the 1930s, that prices stabilized as a result of the creation of the federal tobacco program as part of the Agriculture Adjustments Acts of 1933 and 1938. The campaigns of tobacco companies in the 1970s were different, however, as they faced new threats; while in the twenties and thirties the companies were most interested in

demonstrating the economic importance of the industry, by the 1970s they were interested in presenting tobacco as heritage.

R.J. Reynolds' "Pride in Tobacco" promotion of the late 1970s takes such campaigns a step further, by bringing tobacco farmers to the center of the campaign—farmers are being asked to take pride in a crop that is becoming increasingly stigmatized, and non-farmers are asked to see the pride that farmers take in their work, even if that work is tobacco. "Pride" has multiple meanings in this context. Most obviously, it acknowledges the effects of stigma; if one must be reminded to feel "pride" than one has been somehow made to feel shame. According to Erving Goffman, "the standards [the stigmatize individual] has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what we he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility..." (7).

The term "pride" is particularly important because, as I will discuss in the next chapter, it is a commonly used judgment of competence among tobacco farmers: to have "pride" in your crop means that at every step of production and packaging you demonstrate the highest level of skill; it signifies inclusion in the category "tobacco man." The dual meanings of pride are demonstrated in a quote from a 2005 interview with Jerry Bond that I included in the last chapter, in which he argues that such pride is a thing of the past, "...there was a time when tobacco farmers were proud. And they were proud of their product, and they were proud of their work [...] But that pride doesn't exist any more. [...] It's just not a prideful thing anymore. You're almost like a drug dealer"

(9/15/05). Here, it becomes clear that pride in competence and in the production of a stigmatized crop are impossible to separate.

As I noted in Chapter 3, the R.J. Reynolds campaign—a logo composed of the thumbs-up symbol coupled with a tobacco leaf and the words “Pride in Tobacco”—was applauded by the Commissioner of Agriculture: “Let’s not lose sight of just how important this great crop and the people who grow, buy and process it really are to the heritage and economy of our commonwealth” (KDA Kentucky Agricultural News 1978:2). Here too, “heritage” references the work of farmers; it is categorically separated from the “economy.” Thirty years later, the remnants of what must be understood as a heritage-based campaign remain, as banners in one of the last remaining warehouses and posters in tobacco stripping rooms continue to display the “Pride in Tobacco” logo.

In 1984, Philip Morris made the full step to the celebration of tobacco as a way-of-life through art when the company commissioned a series of twelve paintings by Kentucky artist Toss Chandler. As I noted in Chapter 3, despite the fact that this series, “Twelve Months of Tobacco,” was described in the KDA News as evidence of Philip Morris’ significant role in the tobacco tradition, Philip Morris is not the subject of these paintings—farmers are, since, according to the article, the paintings are an “accurate and moving portrayal of the month-by-month life of the Kentucky burley farmer” (October 1984:4). Exhibited at events throughout the state, this series exemplifies the exploitation of the tobacco farmer and tobacco heritage through tobacco company propaganda.

Such campaigns speak to multiple audiences; to a general audience they argue that tobacco is not only about disease and addiction, but also about hard working American farmers. At the same time, such campaigns seek to persuade members of

tobacco communities that “big tobacco” identifies with them; farmers are reminded that their interests remain aligned. According to Kenneth Burke, “Here is perhaps the simplest case of persuasion. You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (A Rhetoric of Motives 55; *emphasis his*). During this same period, farmers were actively recruited to rally and lobby in Washington or Kentucky’s capitol, Frankfort, against tax increases, FDA regulation, and other legislative “attacks” on the tobacco industry. The exhibit and campaign together make it clear that it is difficult if not impossible to separate cigarette company propaganda from institutional heritage—not surprising since the state and tobacco manufacturers have historically worked hand in hand, and the state has benefited immeasurably from the industry.

Tobacco heritage has also been commonly reproduced as public art. For instance, a mural on one section of the flood wall in Maysville, Kentucky—a northern Kentucky town on the Ohio River that was a fairly large tobacco marketing center—shows a frequently reproduced image: a farmer leaning on the wide door frame of a tobacco barn, looking out across his tobacco fields and additional tobacco barns. The perspective is from the inside of the barn, so that the viewer, with the farmer, looks out over the tobacco work happening in the distance. Although this image re-presents life as it may be happening just outside of town today, the context of this mural tells a story of tobacco heritage; the murals surrounding it stand in for panel labels. This is one of ten murals painted in a project begun in 1998 to “visually demonstrate the historical connection of the Ohio River to Maysville” (“Maysville Floodwall”). The other panels include: Indians hunting buffalo in deep snow; a nineteenth century frontier settlement; a steamboat being

loaded with hogsheads of tobacco and other goods; and “The Marquis de Lafayette” being “Received at Maysville” in 1825. Putting aside the tobacco mural, the only contemporary image presented in this series of murals is the most recent one, a mural that celebrates Rosemary Clooney, born in Maysville. Rosemary Clooney died in 2002, and so even this most contemporary image mourns the passing of a local icon. In this context, tobacco is as distant in time as buffalo roaming the rolling (and snowy) hills of Kentucky or as recent as the sounds of a celebrated songstress, now deceased.

### *Publications and Exhibitions*

Historical texts provide an important and obvious example of institutional heritage production. Among the publications about tobacco history that I described in Chapter 1, are two books published in the 1990s by major tobacco organizations, the Burley Auction Warehouse Association (Greene) and the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association. Both of these serve as histories of their respective organizations published in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversaries of each organization, but they also serve the purpose of telling a larger narrative of tobacco history and heritage. According to the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association,

Jamestown, in the Virginia Tidewater, was a miserable place on a swampy island that took the lives of 800 among the first 1,000 settlers in its first four years of existence.

It was against this background of starvation and misery, then, that the American tobacco industry began. (19)

According to the Burley Auction Warehouse Association, “Selling tobacco leaf [...] is the basis for a time-honored culture. The history of this commerce interweaves with

America's development, as solidly as do the culture-thick commerces of the industrial revolution, the cattlemen of the Old West, or the modern automotive industry" (Greene 12). Both organizations use tobacco heritage as a means to promote their own relevance on the anniversaries of their establishment.<sup>134</sup>

An undated pamphlet distributed by the Council for Burley Tobacco, entitled "Tobacco: Deeply Rooted in America's Heritage," begins:

Tobacco is more deeply rooted in our history than any other commodity. Its role in America's settlement, early development and eventual independence is incalculable. Commerce in tobacco was the economic salvation of the struggling Jamestown colony. Export of the golden leaf to England was the dramatic beginning of trade in the New World. Thereafter, tobacco was a powerful magnet drawing new colonizing enterprises, attracting Europeans to the colonies and creating the basis for a mighty nation and a far-flung industry. Tobacco founded communities, extended boundaries of the original colonies, drew settlers to the "new west" of Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio and Missouri, supported schools and churches, paid for roads...helped build America.

This pamphlet demonstrates both the emplotment of tobacco history described in Chapter 1 and the Council's attempt to defend tobacco production through the deployment of a historical narrative.

Similarly, a pamphlet published by the Tobacco Institute, the former tobacco industry trade group, tells the story of "Kentucky's Tobacco Heritage" in a manner that suggests an abridged version of W.F. Axton's Tobacco and Kentucky, discussed in the first chapter. According to the Tobacco Institute, "The cultivation, sale and manufacture of tobacco play vital roles in the history and economy of the Bluegrass State, as Kentuckians toil to nurture and harvest the fine, light leaf used around the world in cigarettes, smoking and chewing tobacco and snuff" (1). The centerfold of the pamphlet

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<sup>134</sup> Tobacco companies began this practice in earlier years with such publications as The American Tobacco Story published by The American Tobacco Company in 1960.

is a collage of photos of present-day tobacco production, including the quintessential photos of barns, fields, and tobacco being cut. This pamphlet is undated, but the photographs and the mention of baling tobacco near the end of the narrative suggest that it was published in the 1980s. It ends with an emphasis on tobacco farmers in the present; under the heading “Carrying on the Tobacco Tradition” the final statement reads: “The hard work and enthusiasm of the thousands of Kentuckians involved with tobacco assure that the golden leaf will always be an important part of the life and economy of the Bluegrass State” (16). This pamphlet is similar to the tobacco art deployed by the tobacco industry as described above in that it pulls tobacco farmers into the center of the rhetoric of tobacco as a way of life.<sup>135</sup>

Tobacco-related museum displays are far less common in Kentucky than one might imagine. In the summer of 2006, the site of a new state agriculture museum was announced, with a projected opening date of 2010. The central image on the website of the future Kentucky Agriculture Heritage Center is a field of tobacco and a full tobacco barn, an image that at first led me to assumptions about the role that tobacco might be given as a central focus of Kentucky agricultural heritage as this center developed. As plans for the Heritage Center have proceeded, however, what was labeled as a “state agriculture museum” with the potential to draw 200,000 tourists is now described as a future-oriented space with a mission “to create an environment for learning, reflecting on the past, showcasing the present and fostering the advancement of Kentucky Agriculture”

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<sup>135</sup> Although this particular pamphlet appears to have been published in the 1980s, this was not a new tactic of the Tobacco Institute. In his Preface to the 1967 printing of The Story of Tobacco in America (originally published in 1952), Joseph C. Robert notes that the Tobacco Institute, established in 1958, “reports the pro-tobacco side of the medical story and provides attractive pamphlets dealing with the history of the leaf in various states” (xiii).

(“Mission Statement”). The Center will be a “state-of-the-art facility” in which “green” technology will be showcased (“Center Designed with Green in Mind”); it is no longer envisioned as a museum, although there are plans for some type of exhibit space, as yet undefined. A sixty-second public service announcement, viewable on the Center’s website, shows a variety of farm scenes as it describes the creation and planning of the center; there is no tobacco in sight. There are tobacco scenes, however in the eight-minute promotional DVD released in 2007 (“Kentucky Agriculture Heritage Center”).

According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Heritage organizations ensure that places and practices in danger of disappearing because they are no longer occupied or functioning or valued will survive. [Heritage] does this by adding the value of pastness, exhibition, difference, and where possible indigeneity” (“Theorizing Heritage” 370). The prominence of tobacco on the homepage of the future Heritage Center, particularly within the context of their mission to “reflect on the past,” signifies that pastness has been added and exhibition is in the making. Regardless of the future-oriented mission, the images presented add up to a display space in which tobacco is part of the heritage rather than the future of Kentucky agriculture.

Of course there are “tobacco museums,” but there is not one in Kentucky. There is a small tobacco museum in Ripley, Ohio, and an Internet search turned up additional tobacco museums in Kenly and Durham, North Carolina; the Connecticut Valley; South Carolina; as well as China, France, and the Dominican Republic. The lack of a tobacco museum in Kentucky at first seems odd, but my guess is that Kentucky has lacked both the drive and funding for a tobacco museum because Kentucky was not among the most



lucrative tobacco manufacturing regions (although neither was Ripley, Ohio).<sup>136</sup> Based on the information on their websites, many of the U.S. museums opened in the 1980s and 1990s, the time in which tobacco heritage was at its height.

The Tobacco Farm Life Museum in Eastern North Carolina, established in 1983, invites visitors to “Take a trip back in time to a simpler way of life. . .” exemplifying Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s argument that “tourism itself recodes space as time” as it invites the tourist into another, pre-modern, time-period (Destination Culture 194). The museum website also shrouds tobacco in complete pastness through a narrative of the origin of the museum:

The museum was started by a group of local families who had pride in their past and a strong volunteer spirit. Having seen the way of life of their parents and grandparents becoming obsolete, these families wanted to preserve this personal and special history of the Eastern North Carolina flue-cured tobacco farm family for future generations. (Tobacco Farm Life Museum)

Similarly, Duke Homestead in Durham, North Carolina—home of the father of the founders of the American Tobacco Company, himself a tobacco farmer—presents not only tobacco history but a “Tobacco Harvest and Hornworm Festival” that includes “costumed interpreters demonstrat[ing] tobacco harvesting, stringing, and curing tobacco” that continues to be grown onsite (Duke Homestead). The implication is that these demonstrations would be of this work as it was once done, prior to the mechanization of flue-cured tobacco production. This might in fact be one clue as to why

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<sup>136</sup> Ben Crain, formerly a warehouseman and president of the Burley Auction Warehouse Association, told me that he was involved in a collaborative effort by the major tobacco companies in the mid-80s in which a property was purchased for the purpose of establishing a burley museum, but it never materialized because RJ Reynolds backed out. He told me this was his “one regret,” that the museum didn’t happen and there was no place where “burley heritage” is celebrated. In this same conversation he voiced the opinion that the new Agriculture Heritage Center planning committee did not seem very interested in tobacco.

there is no such site in Kentucky, where practices have certainly changed, but burley continues to be harvested and prepared for marketing by hand. None-the-less, costumed interpreters from the past performing traditions that persist in the present (however changed) erase the experiences of those who continue to depend on tobacco for their livelihood.

### *Festivals*

The representation of tobacco in festival contexts highlights the gray area between institutional and vernacular heritage as I am defining them. Tobacco festivals were once common in tobacco communities in Kentucky and other tobacco-producing regions. As I discussed in my analysis of the KDA News, many of the early festivals were sponsored and even fully organized by tobacco manufacturers. Some of these festivals began in the 1930s and 1940s with specific economic agendas, as tobacco marketing centers were looking for ways to draw both tobacco farmers and buyers to a particular market (see B. Roberts). Others began in the early 1980s as celebrations of heritage. The National Tobacco Festival began in Virginia in 1935<sup>137</sup> and, according to Blain Roberts, North Carolina tobacco festivals began in the 1930s as events surrounding the opening of the tobacco markets. This was the case in Kentucky as well, particularly in the largest market, Lexington, but many tobacco festivals took place in the late summer or earlier in the fall and served as harvest festivals. Although larger festivals as well as the festivals in the major manufacturing centers were organized by manufacturers and/or warehouses (such as the Lexington festival described in the KDA News), the many local festivals that

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<sup>137</sup> For a brief description of the festival see the Local Legacies project of the American Folklife Center: <<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/legacies/VA/200003623.html>>.

grew up in small Kentucky communities were community-based festivals—which is not to say that these festivals were not heavily supported by tobacco warehouses and probably tobacco manufacturing money as well. However, their organization by community members rather than manufacturers suggests connections with vernacular heritage, though of course influenced by institutional heritage discourses.

Like other harvest festivals that take place in rural communities featuring apples, pumpkins, strawberries, and other fruits and vegetables, tobacco festivals celebrated the crop that played a central role in these communities, and in these cases the crop was tobacco. Such festivals usually involved both tobacco-related activities such as tobacco contests and the crowning of a tobacco queen or princess. Such pageants were not immune from heritage discourses. As I described in Chapter 3, the KDA announced in their newsletter that “Talent [would] not be a factor” in the 1970 Burley Belle pageant. Instead, the contestants were to be judged on their recitation of an essay that they are each to write on the topic “What Burley Tobacco Means to Kentucky.” Local tobacco festivals also included more generalized festival events such as “coon dog races [...] musical competitions, banquets, formal dances and square dancing” (Bailey 270), and in later years they had become primarily commercialized festivals with vendors and games, and little attention to the crop itself.

These festivals have now largely disappeared or their names have been changed, providing a prime example of the evolution of tobacco heritage. In 2001, the Logan County Tobacco Festival, which first took place in 1941 and 1942 and was then revived in 1957, became the Logan County Tobacco *and Heritage* Festival. In 2006, the Garrard County Tobacco Festival became the *Rural Heritage* Festival after a transitional year in

which it was called the Tobacco/Rural Heritage Festival. The Two Rivers Tobacco/Fall Festival in Carrollton seems to have undergone a similar transition, as it was listed on the Carrollton Carroll County Tourism website in 2008 as simply the Two Rivers Fall Festival (“Calendar of Events”),<sup>138</sup> and the Washington County Sorghum and Tobacco Festival was replaced by the Kentucky Crossroads Harvest Festival (Pettus). In these few examples, the word “tobacco” has disappeared altogether, or the word “heritage” has joined or replaced it.<sup>139</sup> A 2004 article in The (Cincinnati) Enquirer described the disagreements swelling around the Ripley, Ohio, Tobacco Festival, noting that “there are questions about how much longer Ripley will hang on to that heritage” both because of shrinking government quotas (this was just months before the buyout) and because “the use of tobacco has never been more socially unacceptable” (Leingang)—suggesting the possibility that stigma may lead to the renunciation of tobacco heritage.

Garrard County agricultural extension agent Mike Carter described, in an interview with me, two attempts to change the name of the Garrard County Tobacco Festival. The first attempt was made in the 1980s, when a pastor of a church in the community wrote a letter to the local paper suggesting that the name be changed.<sup>140</sup> Upon the request of his farmer constituents, Carter responded with a letter in opposition to the proposed name change, and the letter was “certainly well received within the community” (8/23/07). The proposal to change the name failed.

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<sup>138</sup> Based on a photo in the Kentucky Historical Society collections of the first festival committee, this festival appears to have started in 1934 as the Carrollton Tobacco Festival (“First Carrollton tobacco festival committee”).

<sup>139</sup> I have heard of a number of communities that held such festivals, but have been unable to find a listing of any kind. The towns of Shelbyville and Georgetown had them at one time, among others. Other tobacco states, including Ohio and South Carolina still have tobacco festivals.

<sup>140</sup> Carter described this Pastor to me as a newcomer to the community with a “New York attitude”; this description reflects the perception held by many—mentioned in the last chapter—that the stigma that is associated with tobacco originates in Northern, urban areas.

In the most recent attempt to rename the festival, however, the change to “Rural Heritage Festival” was approved by the festival committee amid grumbling from some community members but in the absence of outright public opposition. Carter views this as a symbol of “how things have evolved in tobacco country.” Interestingly, although 2007 was the first year that the festival was officially the Rural Heritage Festival, the festival name change had not been made on all of the festival signage. I saw a hand-painted sign advertising the Garrard County Tobacco Festival that appeared to be recycled from past years, suggesting ambivalence about or even resistance to the observance of the new name. The Garrard County Tobacco Cutting Contest, an annual event drawing several hundred people that is, as far as I can tell, the last remaining contest of its kind in Kentucky, continues each year despite growing opposition to it. Carter remarked, “Of course I’ve been asked ‘Well is this gonna be the Ag Heritage Cutting Contest?’”

It is important to note that Carter and others who object to such a name change are responding to the removal of “tobacco” from the name rather than to the insertion of the word “heritage.” Yet, these two processes are inseparable, a point which is made apparent through the comment about the cutting contest. Carter was not asked if “tobacco” might be dropped from the name; he was asked if “heritage” would replace it. If asked, I have no doubt that Carter and others who oppose the renaming of the festival would agree that tobacco is part of Garrard County’s *heritage*. What they object to is its erasure from Garrard County’s present-day life and economy; its treatment as “the outmoded, the dead, the defunct”; and the stigma that has become attached to it.

I was told by one grower that the Garrard County Tobacco Festival was started the year of the bicentennial because the president asked Chambers of Commerce throughout the country to have celebrations of local heritage. The festival actually started in 1981, although discussions about it certainly may have begun as early as '76. This “wrong” date might be seen as simply faulty memory, but is more interesting to consider through the lens of Alessandro Portelli’s argument that “false” accounts should not be brushed aside as faulty memory but instead investigated as a source of information about the meanings that particular events hold for people. Above I mentioned a print commemorating the American bicentennial; the bicentennial—a time well-known as one of hyper-self-consciousness of American “heritage” generally—was an important moment for tobacco heritage as well. R.J. Reynolds presented a “250-pound replica of the Liberty Bell constructed of pressed tobacco leaves” to the Smithsonian in celebration of the American bicentennial (Murrell 9), an unambiguous gesture about tobacco’s importance as a symbol of American heritage. Clearly for this farmer, the Garrard County Tobacco Festival symbolized his own reverence for the connection between tobacco and the celebration of American heritage.

Folklife festivals present a very different context for tobacco display. In 1973, Kentucky was the featured state at the Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife, and tobacco farmers and auctioneers were featured at the festival. The Burley Auction Warehouse Association donated \$3000 toward the event, seeing it as a chance to send a “vivid message” “about the essential integrity and historic nature of a tobacco grower’s way of life” (Greene 96). The Kentucky Folklife Festival has included an area dedicated to Kentucky farming traditions, with a particular focus on tobacco, since it began in 1997.

As a festival put on by folklorists working for the state folklife program, this festival supports the mission of the Kentucky Folklife Program to “advance our understanding of the breadth, diversity, and significance of our living cultural heritage.”<sup>141</sup>

The use of “living heritage” emphasizes that the folklife program seeks to celebrate the folklife of present-day Kentuckians and, I would argue, to recover prior meanings of the word “heritage” as it has evolved to refer to beliefs and practices of the past rather than inheritances that we continue to live with in the present. “Living heritage” is an attempt to recuperate a concept of heritage that has value in the daily lives of people living in the present; it is meant to suggest the strength of the cultural traditions of the many groups of Kentuckians represented at the festival. However, as Dan Ben-Amos has pointed out, our use of the phrase “living traditions,” used as early as the late nineteenth century, makes sense only within the context of tradition as “on the verge of total demise” (“Seven Strands” 104). Like “living traditions,” “living heritage” suggests that heritage is threatened, and programs such as the festival are a means to save them.

Folklife festivals have been critiqued by folklorists and this is not the place to examine the history and implications of these events (cf. Bauman, Sawin and Carpenter; Bauman and Sawin; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett Destination Culture and elsewhere). I am interested, however, in how tobacco heritage has been presented in this particular context that attempts to present “living heritage”—because this is not the picture that has been presented, despite the efforts of the KFP staff and my own efforts in 2007.

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<sup>141</sup> As described on the 2007 Kentucky Folklife Festival brochure. The festival began in 1997 and was an annual event until 2001, when it became biennial. This is an example I have been intimately involved with, as I have worked as a presenter at this festival each year that it has taken place, with the exception of the first year, although my involvement in the farming area was limited to the 2005 and 2007 festivals.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concepts of *in situ* and *in context* exhibitions are useful in describing the farming area of the Kentucky Folklife Festival. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *in situ* displays "tend toward environmental and re-creative displays" of objects that are intended to stand in for a larger, absent, whole (Destination Culture 20), while *in context* displays use extensive textual commentaries to contextualize objects. Both objects and people are presented in the farming area of the festival, both *in situ* and *in context*. Each year, attempts have been made to recreate a tobacco stripping room in the farming tent through the display of objects gleaned from actual stripping rooms; each year, the tent has been surrounded by various pieces of farming equipment and a replica of a tobacco curing structure, and in some years a patch of tobacco was planted next to the tent. Two or more farmers were present in the tent, ready to answer questions and provide demonstrations for festival attendees, with the help of festival presenters. In addition to these *in situ* details, signage—including text and photos—has been used to contextualize Kentucky tobacco heritage.

The objects chosen for display each year have primarily been tools and other objects that are now obsolete, such as a wall press (for pressing hands of tobacco), a coke stove, and antique tobacco setters and tractors. The demonstrations have largely consisted of tying hands of tobacco—which, as I have described, has not been a functional activity since the early 1980s—as well as cutting tobacco, in the years that tobacco was planted on site. The farmers that have often participated in recent years have been retired farmers and farmers that no longer raise tobacco, and, until I was invited to participate in 2005, the presenter was a historian, not a folklorist. In addition to tobacco, the farming area has included "alternative" farming opportunities that are being explored



as tobacco markets wane (providing connections to my final chapter, on diversification rhetorics). For instance, one year, next to the tobacco display, visitors had the chance to explore a large mobile unit with exhibits about the Kentucky State University Extension Program's aquaculture projects. Together, these factors have contributed to a picture of tobacco as heritage that is fully in the past rather than "living"; farm activities such as aquaculture are presented as the present and future.

In 2007, I worked with the staff to try and bring the tobacco display into the present. I contributed new text that highlighted the fact that many farmers continue to raise tobacco, despite public discourses to the contrary, as well as photographs of active farmers (including a young farmer) from my fieldwork. I facilitated the borrowing and display of a tobacco baler, polystyrene float trays, and other tools currently used in planting tobacco seeds in float beds and greenhouses. I was unable, however, to recruit active tobacco farmers as participants, primarily because the festival takes place in September at the height of cutting and housing season. I am in no way arguing that my contributions made for an ideal display—and I recognize that my own rhetorical agenda was at work in the changes I made—but rather, I am arguing, with past critics of folklife festivals, that the festival environment presents tremendous challenges for the presentation of "living heritage," and that this display is part of a larger rhetorical moving of tobacco into the past.

The responses of festival visitors were telling as well. On the one hand, the tobacco display was welcomed by festival participants and visitors who raised tobacco and/or continue to do so. I learned a great deal listening to the (largely nostalgic) conversations between farmers who stopped by the tent, and I also met one of the farmers

who became central to my fieldwork when he visited the tent and was pleasantly surprised to find his family occupational tradition on display. Yet, a common response to the display was, “Now here’s a thing of the past!”—demonstrating an assumption held by many that tobacco is gone from Kentucky. In contrast, I would often ask groups of school children to raise their hands if their families raised tobacco; depending on their home county, several or even most of them might raise their hands (and some would say their grandfather or father used to).

### *Tobacco Put to Rest*

News coverage and political discourses related to tobacco farming is laden with the rhetoric of death and dying; heritage has resulted in tobacco put to rest. A May 2005 article in the Lexington Herald-Leader stated that “it’s the dawning of a new and confusing world for Kentucky farmers” and goes on to quote an agriculture agent as saying, “You could be talking about the death of a culture” (Warren). A December 2005 headline from the same newspaper engages this rhetoric even more literally, declaring, “One mourner, but no prayer for tobacco, burley sale becomes a ‘funeral’ one year after quota buyout” (Wilson). This article uses the metaphor of a funeral, throughout, to describe the experiences of one woman, Pat Thompson, who is meant to represent all Kentucky tobacco growers, as she sells her tobacco on contract rather than at auction for the first time.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> This article is rare in that a woman was chosen to represent tobacco farmers, as the category “tobacco farmer” is most often assumed to be filled by men. Women such as Pat Thompson and Alice Baesler (mentioned throughout this dissertation) challenge assumptions as exceptions to the rule.

This article presents not only the death of the tobacco auction but, synecdochically, just as Pat Thompson represents all farmers, the auction symbolizes the entire way of life of the tobacco family. Thompson married a tobacco farmer and lived her life by the “thirteen-month” cycle of the tobacco crop. This passage from the article illustrates it well:

Pat met John Thompson in early fall 1958 and got a ring before Christmas that year. She asked him when they’d marry. She said she was thinking June. He said, no, we’re clearing hay then. May, she asked? No, that’s when we’re setting tobacco. April? We’ll be weeding [tobacco] plant beds then. March? Don’t hardly see it, he answered. They settled on February 14 because he was going to final auction with his tobacco on Feb. 13.<sup>143</sup>

The way of life of Pat Thompson is presented as a life that recalls the ways of the past:

She learned to cook on a wood stove in Shelby County... She remembers when the electricity first came on. She remembers her house had the county’s first phone because her daddy was a game warden. She remembers their first TV and how everybody took turns watching a Kentucky basketball game on the little 7-inch screen.

The way of life of all the Pat Thompsons across Kentucky is here presented as one of life before electricity, phones, television, and other such symbols of modernity, but, according to Pat Thompson, it is now “the end of an era.” This article exemplifies the rhetoric that currently surrounds the situation for tobacco farmers in Kentucky and other tobacco-producing states; what is being mourned, both literally and metaphorically, is not only the end of tobacco, but what is understood to be the end of a way of life. Tobacco is

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<sup>143</sup> I was told several stories of weddings determined by the tobacco calendar. Martin told that after he and Kathy got their marriage license they just barely got the crop in in time to get married before it expired; otherwise they would have had to pay to renew it. He also told me a story of somebody getting married in the county magistrate’s stripping room because even the magistrate’s schedule was determined by tobacco work.

now as much a part of the past as life without the modern conveniences of electricity and television.

While growers and many others continue to identify tobacco farming as a tradition, public discourses originating from public and private institutions have rhetorically recategorized the crop, the occupation, and the way of life as “heritage,” devoid of economic importance in the present. The festival renamings and articles such as this one about Pat Thompson are examples of a much larger shift in the public recognition of tobacco’s role in Kentucky, a shift in the way that Kentucky’s tobacco heritage is presented in institutional contexts. I noted in Chapter 3 that in 2004 the Kentucky Department of Agriculture “celebrate[d] the history of Kentucky agriculture with a mock tobacco barn, antique farm equipment and other displays alongside the [state] fair’s historical education and culture booths” (KDA, Kentucky Agricultural News, July 2004, 3). As Kenneth Burke tells us, “Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations...*many of the ‘observations’ are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made*” (“Terministic Screens” 46 *emphasis his*). As “heritage” either becomes the terminology used to describe tobacco farming or literally replaces it in public discourses, the term serves as a screen through which the public views tobacco farming. When viewed through the terministic screen of “heritage,” tobacco is in the past and tobacco farmers are living relics of Kentucky’s history; worse, they are growing a crop that is no longer understood to be profitable, and therefore those who still farm it are understood as simply too stubborn to let go of a dying tradition.

Institutional tobacco heritage, as described above, underwent an evolution that coincided with external events and changing attitudes. In the 1970s and 80s, in the aftermath of the 1964 Surgeon General's report and its consequences, such as the 1971 nationwide ban of television ads, both tobacco companies and the state celebrated tobacco heritage as an occupational way of life that was threatened, through the creation of heritage art. By the 1990s, it was becoming clear that heritage was not capable of recovering tobacco; it could neither salvage the public's opinion nor could it serve as a defense in the many lawsuits brought against manufacturers. During the 1990s, tobacco organizations published historical accounts of their former roles, tobacco art and displays focused on a distant past, the very word "tobacco" was replaced or joined by "heritage" in local festival names, and issues of current relevance to the tobacco industry disappeared from the pages of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter. Tobacco was erased from the present through the new forms that institutional heritage took; "heritage" now meant history.

But not only has the heritage label pushed tobacco into the past and removed its continued economic importance from current awareness, it has also contributed to the movement of stigma from users to farmers. By making "tobacco farming as a way of life" a central rhetorical strategy in the defense of the industry as the health effects of tobacco use became impossible to deny, together the state and "big tobacco" shifted the stigma from the industry to the farm. In attempts to deflect blame, institutional heritage discourses moved farmers to the foreground, implicating them as "contributors to the cancer." In a study conducted in 1995, of 991 non-tobacco farmer respondents, 29%

agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Tobacco farmers are responsible for health problems experienced by smokers” (Altman et. al. 119).

In his critique of “heritage” discourses, James F. Abrams uses pentadic criticism, as conceptualized by Kenneth Burke, to argue that because the set influences the actors in the scene, “If textualized and thematized space is frozen into images of the past, people within the frame become actors, objects of memory, spectators to their own history...” (28). Herein lies the dangers of the heritage label, as applied to cultural practices that continue to be of economic importance to people in the present; individuals are objectified and their practices understood as outmoded. Institutional expressions of tobacco as heritage not only erase tobacco farming and the tobacco farmer from the present, but they make tobacco farming *about* heritage and *not about* economic survival. While the institutional heritage displays I have described may have set out to salvage the image of tobacco as stigma grew, the image is one of a “second life” in which tobacco farming is no longer a viable occupation but a quaint way of life that belongs in the past. If this is the case, then the tobacco farmer can only be understood as irrationally clinging to a way of life that has vanished. This, as I will demonstrate, is a key difference between institutional and vernacular heritage.

### **In Defense of Tobacco’s First Life: Expressions of Vernacular Heritage**

Vernacular expressions of tobacco heritage must be understood within this context of a forced consciousness of tobacco as part of Kentucky’s past. The expressions I will discuss invoke the messages of institutional heritage, but with different rhetorical purposes. Events, informal displays, and discourses that resist the stigma of tobacco

production both recycle institutional discourses and invoke the prior meanings of “heritage” in order to defy the brushstroke of pastness. They argue that tobacco farming is an inherited way of life that continues to be of economic importance, one that has allowed Kentucky to hold onto small family farms while other regions have lost them.

The Garrard County Tobacco Cutting Contest mentioned above and cutting contests once held in other counties provide examples of the performance of vernacular heritage. According to Mike Carter, the cutting contest was started in the early 1980s in order to celebrate tobacco heritage amidst growing threats:

We wanted to do something here to, celebrate our, heritage. Um, as a tobacco-growing community. As we talked about last time you know tobacco’s much more than a, farming enterprise, it’s a way of life. Or has been for generations. Uh, even at that time in the 80s there were a lot of questions concerns uh speculations about “Where’re we headed with tobacco?” “How much longer is it gonna be a legal crop?” “How long is the price support and quota system-” you know these discussions have been held forever. Uh. But uh we as a community are very proud of our tobacco heritage- there was already an effort underway to have a Garrard County Tobacco Festival. (8/23/07)

Over the years, the organizers, tobacco farmers led by Mike Carter, turned down offers of sponsorship from Philip Morris, preferring to raise money for the contest—covering prize money and a meal for all who attend—from local businesses rather than turn any control over to manufacturers. Carter assured me they’d never had a problem raising money from the community.<sup>144</sup>

Vernacular heritage can be seen in display contexts as well as performance contexts. Tobacco-related displays in the offices of agricultural extension agents, particularly those who were raised on tobacco farms (as many were) are quite common.

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<sup>144</sup> Because of multiple circumstances beyond my control, I have been unable to attend the cutting contest (my “one regret”), so I am dependent on descriptions given to me by participants and media coverage; for this reason I will not spend a great deal of time on it here.

The center of these displays is often a “hand” of tobacco, an object that is in fact entirely obsolete and has become a prominent symbol of the past days of tobacco. Tools used to cut tobacco are also included in these displays, including those that are no longer in use—such as tools used to set tobacco by hand, which became mostly obsolete with the adoption of the mechanical setter and an older style tobacco knife that was replaced by the “tomahawk”—but always also include the tools that are still used to cut tobacco, the tomahawk and spear and often tobacco sticks. Other items that accompany these displays differ, but I have seen objects made by local farmers out of cured tobacco such as braided wreaths and miniature baskets packed with miniature hands of tobacco (replicas of the way in which tobacco was marketed until the early 1980s); photographs and paintings of tobacco landscapes and work; and blankets and quilts featuring visual images and symbols of tobacco and in the case of the wall-hanging mentioned above, “Tobacco Our Heritage.”

The wall-hanging, paintings, and photographs exemplify the interaction of institutional and vernacular heritage. The “heritage” wall-hanging in fact shows signs that it was mass- rather than locally-produced. One of the steps of production included is “priming,” the practice of removing the leaves from the plant in the field from the bottom up as the leaves mature. This practice was briefly used by some burley farmers before the mid-twentieth century, but is not generally considered a part of burley production; it is however, central to flue-cured or bright tobacco, suggesting that this wall-hanging originated in a different tobacco producing region such as the Carolinas. Many of the prints, too, are mass-produced or are images that are similar if not identical to those promoted in institutional tobacco heritage contexts. However, though they echo the



“tobacco as a way of life” rhetoric of institutional heritages, in vernacular contexts, these displays of tobacco objects and images lose their contextualizing labels and along with them the resignation that tobacco now lives only in exhibition.

Ray Cashman has argued that “material culture is useful in part for coming to terms with massive economic, social, and cultural changes associated with modernity” (144), a useful argument for thinking about the vernacular tobacco-as-heritage displays described here. Certainly these displays present elements of nostalgia as well; like the collections of farm machinery that Cashman describes, these displays act as material representations of the changes that have occurred in tobacco country. The tools that are on display act as synecdoches for the technological changes as well as changes in the markets, the status of the crop, and the now self-consciously described “way of life” more generally. Extension workers, particularly those that grew up raising tobacco, are honoring both their own pasts and Kentucky’s agricultural past by exhibiting tools that were once used next to tools that are still used—and that often *they* once used in tobacco fields. In a 2005 article in the local paper about the displays in his office (from tobacco objects to memorabilia related to both the University of Kentucky and the county high school sports teams), Carter commented that “There is a lot of me in here,” and “I also wanted the farmers of Garrard County to feel comfortable when they come in” (Edwards).

Through these exhibits, agents seek identification with farmers who come to their offices; the exhibits show the farmers who come in that the agents continue to support them, and, most importantly, that they will continue to provide research-based guidance about varieties, diseases, and new farm practices and technologies, despite the stigma

now attached to them and the crop that they raise. Through such displays, extension agents are defending the *heritage* of a crop—the inherited knowledge and skills involved in the production of a crop that has been economically central for generations—that has become stigmatized. While Cashman’s Northern Ireland collectors and performers heal community pain regarding “the Troubles” through nostalgic displays of material culture, these extension agents use material culture displays to attempt to heal the stigma of tobacco and to honor the respected place it once held.

The vernacular usage of the term “heritage,” like the institutional use, signals a threat to tobacco, as exemplified in Carter’s description of the establishment of the cutting contest as a way of honoring tobacco heritage in a time in which it was perceived as threatened. However, the word “heritage” was rarely uttered in my ethnographic work with farmers, although extension staff often used it. When I asked Dan Grigson about how perspectives on the past and future of Kentucky tobacco are affected by the stigma attached to smoking, he told me that the future wasn’t “rosy,” but it wasn’t grim, and he went on to say,

Now how does that affect the lifestyle of Kentucky? I think all of us who’ve grown up with tobacco uh, are proud of the heritage and how it’s helped, like a guy like me, make his way through college, who was also getting married as a sophomore in college and [if] it had not been for that tobacco and those cows and that farm way of life, I couldn’t have done it probably.

The vernacular use of the term “heritage” explicitly connects tobacco heritage with the economic importance of tobacco, returning what institutional heritage has left out; extension agents use the heritage displays in their offices, as well as the term itself, as a

means of resisting institutional rhetorics of heritage that have pushed tobacco into the past.

Although farmers may not use the word “heritage” very often, they do employ rhetorical strategies to talk back to institutional heritage discourses. With them, they resist the stigma that now permeates their world and the erasure of the awareness of tobacco’s continued economic importance to them. Over the course of my fieldwork, I began to see patterns in the discourses of those in tobacco communities; I came to see these discourses as multiple rhetorics of defense in response to the changing status of tobacco. Farmers have skillfully chosen to deploy discourses that have not yet been impeached as they defend the continued production of tobacco in dramatically changed circumstances. Such discourses serve to remind audiences of tobacco’s complex role in the past, present, and future of Kentucky. Eventually I came to see that together these rhetorics must be understood as expressions of vernacular heritage.

*“It’s a legal crop”*

Over and over during my fieldwork, I heard the steady refrain “it’s a legal crop.” County Extension Agent Mike Carter told me,

A lot of growers will tell you that it is a legal crop. It is a potentially profitable crop. “There are companies that want to buy it, and are willing to pay me a fair price for it. As long as it’s legal, and I can make money doing it, I’m gonna continue to grow it.” (8/23/07)

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the refrain “it’s a legal crop” is a response to the stigma surrounding tobacco production, vividly suggesting that farmers feel as

though they have been treated as criminals although they have not broken the law. The legal status of the crop was very often raised by county agents, perhaps reflecting pressure from constituents who oppose the University's continued work with tobacco. In a discussion about the growing lack of knowledge in the general public about agriculture, Dan Grigson and I had this exchange, which suggests that he is responding to criticisms he has experienced:

Ann: Is it harder- or would it be harder to educate people about, tobacco versus food-

Grigson: Oh yes. It's much much harder. Because so many folks are anti-tobacco because of the health issues that are related to it so. There are many folks who would say "well I don't want to hear anything about tobacco, you oughta totally quit that anyway."

Ann: And Kentucky folks?

Grigson: Yes, even Kentucky folks yeah. I mean it but it's still a legal product and as long as it is, then I, you know it's a crop that we can grow I think we need to continue to grow it, we need to continue to educate folks about it.

The legal status of tobacco was raised by farmers as well, often in direct statements that "as long as it's legal and I can make a profit, I will keep raising it." At times it was also followed by statements such as, "I'm not telling anybody to smoke..." Clarence Gallagher told me, "I don't think you'll prob'ly ever see tobacco go completely out unless they put a ban on- [unless] you just ain't allowed to smoke in America."

This defense—most explicitly in comments such as Clarence's, but implicitly in the comments of others—also references the ongoing debates about whether the Federal Drug Administration should regulate tobacco, which brings with it the fear that if the

FDA becomes involved they will eventually outlaw tobacco all together.<sup>145</sup> I suspect that this defense also implicitly points out the legal difference between tobacco and another (some argue even bigger) Kentucky cash crop: marijuana.<sup>146</sup> As I discussed in the previous chapter, I have also been told stories by growers in which direct comparisons were made between them and growers of illegal drugs such as marijuana and opium poppies, comparisons which they found deeply offensive.

The “legal” argument refers both to tobacco as a legal *crop* and tobacco *products* as legal to use; implicit in the argument is the idea that people should be able to retain their choice to grow it and to smoke it—echoing the “smoking is a choice rather than an addiction” rhetoric of tobacco companies. According to Altman et. al., “In tobacco states, arguments centering on the importance to the local economy are often presented as an issue of personal freedom to farm successfully, to grow chosen crops, and to continue multi-generational family and cultural traditions” (121). This is essentially a heritage-based argument. On the surface, the rhetoric of choice may reference the tobacco lawsuits of the 1990s, arguing against judgments in favor of smokers who sued tobacco

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<sup>145</sup> FDA regulation has finally come to pass, with the support of Philip Morris who, in recent years, has done a turnabout, announcing their support of FDA regulation of the tobacco industry. In talking with tobacco community members, it seems that Philip Morris, who is working on “safer” products, has come to desire FDA regulation as a shield. If the FDA regulates their products and even endorses new products as safer, then, PM seems to reason, they will be shielded from lawsuits such as those of the last two decades. As has been widely noted in the media coverage of the FDA debates, it is the perception of many (particularly other tobacco companies) that the limits on tobacco product marketing included in the legislation will help PM to protect their current sales dominance. Interestingly, Philip Morris has also split into Philip Morris International (PMI) and Philip Morris USA (PMUSA) to the extent that farmers sign contracts with and deliver to one or the other exclusively—a circumstance that had people scratching their heads. I wonder if this is a strategy traceable in part to FDA regulation since presumably PMI, which makes products for sale abroad, would not be under FDA regulation while PMUSA would. Also see Benson for an analysis of Philip Morris’ motives and the responses to them. FDA regulation has also been seen by farmers as the prospect of additional governmental interference in on-farm practices. The legislation specifically forbids FDA regulation of tobacco farms, but of course growers will be indirectly regulated via their contracts with manufacturers.

<sup>146</sup> And although there may be no direct connection here, it is also important to note that hemp, which can no longer be legally grown in the U.S., played an important role in Kentucky’s early economy. Between 1840 and 1870 “Kentucky produced nearly all the hemp grown in the US” (Axton 46-47).

companies based on their inability to quit smoking.<sup>147</sup> Just as important, however, is the embedded argument that American heritage is based on the values of freedom and independence, linking the “legal” rhetoric to a related rhetoric of the historical importance of tobacco in the founding of the nation—another echo of institutional heritage.

*“Tobacco has been important since the founding of this country”*

Farmers and extension agents frequently bring up the historical importance of tobacco, often listing historical details such as those I described in the first chapter, such as that tobacco was once used as currency, that it funded the Revolutionary War, and that tobacco leaves adorn our nation’s capitol. I asked former tobacco farmers Phil and Phyllis Sharp about their opinions about the future of tobacco and Phil replied that the future doesn’t “look too good”; this exchange then ensued:

Phyllis: But it’s been, and it is, an important part of history, farmers’ history.

Phil: Yeah, uh tobacco was used the same as gold and stuff in the early days, that’s how they- they traded tobacco for money, for, it was the currency a lot of places, years ago

Phyllis: I read a book called one time it was called “Golden,” “Golden Leaf” I think it was something about how valuable it was-<sup>148</sup>

Phil: It probably- It probably uh contributed to the growth of this country a whole lot, in its time, actually. Cause it probably paid a lot of the Civil War and Revolutionary bills, and everything else.

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<sup>147</sup> This is one of many examples in which tobacco growers align themselves with the interests of tobacco companies, even as they know that they are subject to their power, because their interests are simultaneously competing and intertwined.

<sup>148</sup> I’ve not located the book she references here, although it might be Brooks, J.E. *Green Leaf and Gold: Tobacco in North Carolina*. Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1975.

G.B. Shell instructed me on tobacco history in a March 2007 interview:

Ann: What other things do uh, do people who don't know about tobacco- what other things do they need to know?

Shell: Well tobacco has been important since the founding of this country. I guess a lot of people don't know that but around the capitol of the United States, what do you see? Tobacco leaves, around the uh, the uh Capitol building. Do you know why they're there?

Ann: No sir why are they there?

Shell: You don't know why they're there? In the [...] Revolutionary War, we borrowed money from France, to finance the war. And we give 'em a mortgage on the tobacco crop. That's why they're there.

Mr. Shell and I had almost the exact same exchange in a January 2008 interview, except this time he teased me because he knew that I knew the answer. I told him I wanted to hear him tell it, and he did, but this time he added the coda, "Whenever these people put down tobacco so bad, they're putting down the whole country." G.B. Shell and the Sharps argue that although tobacco may be stigmatized in the present, we cannot forget what it did for *all of us* in the past; patriotism demands it. One function of these narratives is to reconstruct continuity with the past through a pride in tobacco heritage, in order to heal a rupture that occurred as the stigma of tobacco grew, and farm incomes became increasingly threatened. While G.B. Shell insists that tobacco's future is sound, retired farmers such as Phil and Phyllis Sharp question tobacco's future; in both cases, however, it is important to them that tobacco's heritage continue to be recognized since they spent their lives raising it to support their families.

The publication Tobacco Church II, mentioned in the previous chapter, includes an article that tells the historical narrative of tobacco in the U.S. The author begins with

a series of questions that “frequently arise” amid the many attacks on tobacco, and frames the chapter as a means of understanding the grower:

How can salt-of-the-earth people such as farmers produce crops that medical science shows to do such harm when used in consumer products? Or why, amid the current onslaught of lawsuits and negative publicity, do these farmers still go to their fields and plant new tobacco crops, as if nothing were wrong? Or why don't these often-struggling farmers welcome opportunities to grow other crops that are politically correct?

For answers, this paper examines the history of tobacco culture in North America. (71)

In this publication—arguably vernacular in nature—heritage is used to explain and defend tobacco farming.

*Tobacco “paid the taxes, paid the insurance, [and] put the kids through college”*

The mantra I heard most often argues the importance of the economic heritage of tobacco. This rhetoric of defense also seems to be about reestablishing continuity, but this one works at a more personal and emotional level, reminding us that many Kentuckians have depended for multiple generations on growing tobacco as a source of income that, according to Jerry Bond, “paid the taxes, paid the insurance, [and] put the kids through college” (K. and J. Bond, 9/15/05). This refrain was heard in my quote from Valerie Grigson in the previous chapter, in which she asked how she was to explain to her children that tobacco paid for the house, the car, and their Christmas presents and in Dan Grigson’s comment above that tobacco heritage paid his way through college.<sup>149</sup> Alvin Bogey told me in 2005,

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<sup>149</sup> Although I met Valerie and Dan independently of one another, Dan is Valerie’s brother-in-law.



I started farming, when I was about six years old, that's when my dad bought a farm and, and, I drove a team for him then. And we raised tobacco w- every year. Tobacco has meant the livelihood of my father and the family, it has meant the livelihood of myself. If it hadn't been for tobacco, my two daughters wouldn't have had a college education. I put 'em through college and, they both are, taught school and have retired now. Tobacco has made that. Tobacco has got some bad points, but it's got some good points. If it hadn't been for tobacco, there'd been some kids wouldn't have shoes in the winter time, wouldn't uh got to go to school, or maybe had some food, on the table.

I have heard numerous recitations of all the things that tobacco has made possible and have also seen short-hand versions in such places as the front bumpers of pickup trucks that proclaim "Tobacco pays my bills." This mantra argues that poundage prices have not kept up with farm expenses to the extent that tobacco income can no longer do all of the things named in these rhythmic lists, including paying for a farm. Tobacco heritage once meant farm stability, but there is no longer much of anything that is stable about it (and indeed it was from the beginning a tumultuous industry). And yet, "Tobacco pays my bills" argues that it remains economically important, in the present tense, to many.

This mantra is not new; variants of it have served rhetorical purposes in political contexts at least as far back as the years following the Surgeon General's report.

Immediately following the release of the report, the state agricultural commissioner stated in his testimony to a House Tobacco Subcommittee that:

In my state, tobacco prices set real estate values; bring good times, or bad, for our economy; furnish additional money to go to Detroit for autos, trucks and tractors; permit homes to be modernized; and often times make a college education possible for deserving young men and women. (KDA, Kentucky Department of Agriculture Bulletin February 1964, 2)

In 1969, former Virginia governor Mills E. Godwin Jr. pointed out that tobacco "has paid ministers of the gospel, financed educational institutions, sponsored millions of dollars of

medical research and contributed greatly to underwriting the cost of federal, state, and local governments” (as quoted in Wagner 247). In January 1992, Kentucky Senator Wendell Ford argued in the KDA News, “Tobacco program is still vital to state” (3); although explicitly about the tobacco program he is implicitly arguing that tobacco is still economically viable, as at this time he and other tobacco defenders could not imagine tobacco production without the program. The rhetoric of all that tobacco has paid for could be heard in a 2003 floor Senate speech by Kentucky Senator Jim Bunning, in favor of the Tobacco Market Transition Act (the Senate version of the buyout), as he described the economic importance of tobacco to many of his constituents: it “pays their mortgage, puts their kids through school or allows them to keep farming.” These examples seek to remind audiences that tobacco continues to be of economic importance; tobacco not only benefits farmers and their children, but—as is being argued in the historical mantra above—we have all benefited from the monies generated by tobacco taxes and spent by tobacco farmers in local economies. This mantra recognizes the economic heritage of tobacco; it argues that farmers have inherited the means and knowledge of raising a particular crop, and that crop has been central to their livelihood.

Each of these rhetorics of defense depends on our hearing the unsaid: “*You may not like tobacco*, but...”: “*You may not like tobacco*, but it is a legal crop”; “*You may not like tobacco*, but it financed the founding of our nation”; “*You may not like tobacco*, but it has supported my family and other Kentucky families for generations.” Together, these rhetorics of defense are not merely responses to the stigma that has become attached to tobacco; they are that, but they also argue that growing tobacco is a legal practice that has been economically important to farmers and non-farmers alike throughout the history of

our nation. They argue that tobacco culture is an inheritance with continued importance in the present, central to family heritage as well as to our heritage as Americans.

Heritage scholars have demonstrated that heritage is deployed in situations in which dying economies seek value-added opportunities for revival. Tobacco provides an opportunity to examine the heritage label as it is applied to economies that are not dead but are understood as threatened. Vernacular discourses argue “we’re still here.” There is no doubt that tobacco farmers face an uncertain future, subject as they are to the buying decisions of the manufacturers of tobacco products and the judgment of an increasingly anti-tobacco public. Tobacco production may in fact leave Kentucky completely in the coming years. An understanding of vernacular perspectives on the crop that has been central to the Kentucky economy for generations is essential to ensuring that farmers have a say in their own futures.

An examination of institutional heritage discourses about tobacco provides illustrative examples of the production of heritage as described by heritage scholars, as tobacco was re-presented as art and history estranged from its economic value. Through the display and celebration of tradition under threat, heritage became a tactic for defending tobacco production. What makes the case of tobacco particularly interesting, however, is the failure of heritage in attempting to recover a stigmatized practice. The tobacco companies used heritage in their attempts to deflect blame; we can add heritage production to the genres of propaganda used by this most rhetorically skilled of all industries. The tobacco companies have indeed taken to heart Aristotle’s classic

definition of rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (181). Institutional heritage intensified over the decades as threats increased, and it became harder to deny the health effects of tobacco use. “Heritage” as produced by tobacco companies, in particular, succeeded in implicating the farmer through the valorization of tobacco farming as “a way of life” rather than a source of income, as tobacco companies used heritage to shift the focus of public attention. Ultimately, this “way of life” and those who still live some form of it were largely erased from the present. While the erasure of tobacco farmers may not have been foreseen by the companies or the state, both benefit from the fact that farmers continue to raise this crop largely under the radar of public attention. The state of Kentucky is heavily invested in reinventing the agricultural image of the state because of tobacco’s stigma; in recent years the Kentucky Department of Agriculture has worked to change the public face of Kentucky agriculture from one of “tobacco dependency” to one that is increasingly based on “alternative” crops (such as vegetables and flowers), “value-added” products (from salsa to wine), and agritourism. I will return to this process in Chapter 7.

Tobacco as stigmatized heritage also suggests further questions for heritage theory. For instance, if, as I have argued, the heritage label played a role in the spread of tobacco’s stigma to farmers, are there larger lessons in this case study about the stigmatizing function of the heritage label itself? Tobacco-as-heritage was a solution to stigma, but a solution that ultimately failed, as its second life became non-productive. Tobacco heritage itself may now be threatened by stigma. The past few years have seen an erasure of tobacco from public discourses at the same time as some have predicted the possibility of a revival of the tobacco market and a continuation of the first life of tobacco

as an economic tradition, though a changed one as traditional marketing practices have ended and farm sizes grow. What might the failure of heritage production in this case study tell us about heritage production more generally? How does heritage serve to erase particular dimensions of the past (in this case, smoking) while venerating others (the bucolic way of life on tobacco farms of the past)?

Vernacular heritage borrowed from institutional discourses, putting these discourses to new rhetorical purposes. Rather than resigning tobacco to the past, vernacular heritage speaks back to the erasure of tobacco as a tradition that continues in the present and serves to heal a rupture with the past caused by the growing stigma that has spread from products and producers to farmers. For tobacco farmers, heritage discourses serve as a means of reclaiming and celebrating a traditional occupation and way of life, and such discourses can serve as a means of acknowledging and coping with change.

Vernacular expressions of heritage challenge us to continue in the pursuit of a comprehensive theory of heritage. As a case study, tobacco heritage suggests that we heed Abrams' call to move beyond the study of institutional heritage production to studies of heritage on the ground, asking questions about how heritage is deployed in multiple contexts and for multiple purposes. How do current and prior meanings of the term "heritage" interact? What functions do multiple forms of heritage serve and for whom? This case study also suggests the need for understanding the relationships between heritage discourses. Vernacular heritages do not merely regurgitate institutional discourses; the two exist in a dialogic relationship. What might be gained by examining the process of exchange, appropriation, and reinvention?

Tobacco heritage reinforces Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's call that "[w]hereas we have tended to focus on that which counts as heritage, much remains to be done on the instruments for producing heritage" ("Theorizing Heritage" 379). At the same time it also suggests that in addition to cataloguing heritage and critiquing our own production of it, much remains to be understood about heritage as enacted and deployed at the vernacular level.

## CHAPTER 6: “Now’s the good ol’ days”: Tobacco Production, Nostalgia, and the Performance of Masculinity

In November 2000, at the second annual conference of the group Kentucky Women in Agriculture, I struck up a conversation with a woman attendee. During our brief exchange, I learned that she and her husband raised tobacco and their future seemed increasingly uncertain: their growing quotas were being cut and her husband now worked a full-time job off the farm while continuing to raise a small amount of tobacco. Tobacco farming went back multiple generations in his family, but not in hers. For him, she told me, it was not just a crop or a source of income; it was a way of life. Despite working a full-time job off the farm, he thought of himself as a *tobacco farmer* and she feared that the time would come when he would no longer be able to grow tobacco, and what that would mean for him.

The theme of the conference, held in Louisville, was “Managing Change,” and while the overall purpose was to provide a wide range of information and resources to women involved in some way in agriculture, a major component of the conference was the exchange of information about issues related to agricultural diversification and sustainability—not exclusive to but in a context of a decline in tobacco production. Although it was difficult to live in Kentucky, as I did at the time, and not find yourself in conversations about tobacco farming—both the culture and politics of it—and although I

never saw this woman again, this particular conversation stayed with me, and was the seed that grew into this dissertation project.

This story held power for me as a moment of realization that there was a gendered story, central to the decline of tobacco production, that was not being articulated in public discourses. Raising tobacco was a multi-generational tradition for this woman's husband, one that he was fighting to hold onto. He was working off the farm in part to support his ability to continue farming tobacco and to maintain the family farm that had passed to him from his father. She and the other women attending this conference, on the other hand, were exploring new farming opportunities in hopes of finding new ways to hold onto their family farms (many of which presumably, were also originally their husbands' family farms). The research that I have since conducted has both corroborated and complicated the story that I came away with on that day in 2000. However, both the history of tobacco production and of the current transition period have proven to be gendered stories.

In the first five chapters of this dissertation, I have told stories of change. Tobacco farmers have faced changes at the levels of production and of public opinion; they have embraced new innovations and they have moved from production within a federal marketing program to an open market environment, and from a position of respect in the community to a newly stigmatized category. In the remaining two chapters, I will return to the implications of my conversation outside that conference in 2000, examining tobacco production and the changes that farmers face through a gendered lens, and the discourses of diversification and the gendered implications of "diversifying" a tobacco farm. In this chapter, I will examine the gendering of tobacco production as a family and



occupational tradition, the performance of masculinity through the cultural practices of and relationship to tobacco, and expressions of nostalgia for a golden age of masculinity. I will examine particular expressions of tobacco nostalgia that communicate feelings of loss for a better time of tobacco production, but not necessarily for the best economic times for tobacco farmers. Through such discourses, tobacco farmers express a longing not for a return to these times—which would be economically unfeasible—but for the pride and respect associated with a “tobacco man” identity in such times. Therefore, in this chapter I will examine the connection between the production and performance of masculinity, changing cultural practices, and discourses of nostalgia and loss.

### **The Gendered Division of Labor on the Farm**

Despite the fact that tobacco production was, until recent decades, dependent on the work of the entire family—often each family member had specific roles to play at each stage of the process, based on gender, age, and ability—the crop and the work are most often controlled by men and gendered male in discourse and performance. Tobacco is certainly not unique in this regard. The work on American family farms more generally has traditionally been directed by men and carried out by men along with, at times when additional labor is needed for particular tasks, women (cf. Sachs; J. Jones 20; Ramírez-Ferrero 106). The male in charge is labeled the “farmer,” a category that is gendered male, and is therefore specifically marked when it is used to refer to women; men are farmers while women are “women farmers.”<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Cf. Traugher and Peter et al. In my experience, this category is also racially marked, so there are farmers and there are “black farmers” and “minority farmers.”

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly examined gender on the farm, in particular the gendered division of labor, structures of decision-making, and correlations between the two. Rachel Ann Rosenfeld examined the first national survey of farm women, carried out by the USDA in 1980, and found that women were often involved in decision-making on the farm, but not in decisions directly tied to crops, such as what to grow and how much, and when to perform specific tasks such as plowing and applying fertilizers and other chemicals. She also found that farm mechanization both lessened the need for women's labor on the farm and may have pushed women out of farm labor because farm machinery is designed by and for the bodies of men (22-23). Similarly, Alan Hall and others argue that increased mechanization and chemical use has separated women and the farm household from the farming operation. Such changes are in evidence on Kentucky tobacco farms.

As described in Chapter 2, the major periods of labor needs in tobacco include setting, topping, cutting and housing, and stripping. With the exception of those who are now raising increasingly larger acreages of tobacco, the other tasks involved can often be handled by a single person. The traditional division of labor, reflecting general norms through the 1980s, has been described to me by participants in my fieldwork as follows. At tobacco setting time, everyone pulled plants, although women spent more time in the plant beds while men prepared, or *worked*, the ground. I was often told that women were better at this, and this appears to be a long held belief, as Virgil Steed commented in 1947: "Dexterous fingers weave through the bed in quest of stocky plants. Women are especially good at this" (115).

When it was time to transplant or “set” the tobacco, women and older children rode the setter while men drove the tractor; small children traditionally followed the tobacco setter and re-set missed plants. I was told by one woman in her early 50s that when she was a child, even though others on the farm (herself included) drove the tractor for other purposes at other times, only her father drove the tractor during tobacco setting. Farmers occasionally told me stories in which they had given in to their wives’ requests to drive the tractor to set some tobacco and inevitably the wives were incapable (trying for the first time) of setting the tobacco in a straight row; these wives were not permitted to pull the setter again.

Everyone topped, and prior to the introduction of MH-30 in the 1960s, everyone suckered. During cutting and housing, children (and some women) picked up dropped leaves after the men and older boys cut and speared the tobacco. Women occasionally cut tobacco; this was more common on smaller, poorer farms, on which hired labor was scarce. I occasionally heard about male/female couples on very small farms who would cut the tobacco together; the husband would cut it and the wife would come behind him and spear it. Women and older children sometimes handed the sticks of tobacco off the wagon up to men, but most often men did this as well, and men climbed up into the tiers and hung it. Everyone stripped, according to their age and skill level. In the midst of farm work, women traditionally cooked large meals to serve to workers—whether family, neighbors, hired hands, or some combination—particularly during cutting and housing when large numbers of men were hired. The male farmer monitored the crop for signs of disease and pests, determined when all activities took place, applied the chemicals, drove the tractor and other equipment, and often stripped the most difficult—the middle—

grades of tobacco. At least as far back as 1800, the knowledge of when to cut a crop of tobacco was recognized as specialized knowledge. According to William Tatham, for instance:

Much practice is required to form a judicious discernment concerning the state and progress of the ripening leaf; yet care must be used to cut up the plant as soon as it is sufficiently ripe to promise a good curable condition, lest the approach of frost should treat upon the heels of the crop-master. (21-22)

The same is true of knowing when it is *in case* and ready to be stripped, as I discussed in Chapter 2. The male farmer also prepared it for market and took it to the auction for sale; it is now he who takes it to the receiving station. In addition to the tasks described here, women also traditionally took care of the farm books, maintained the family garden, and of course had primary responsibility for household chores and the raising of children.<sup>151</sup>

Over the last couple of decades, the circumstances of labor on tobacco farms have changed dramatically, as they have on family farms nationwide. It is important to point out that some hired labor was always needed, a fact that was often glossed over in the interviews I conducted and conversations I had with farmers; the focus instead was on a nostalgia for a reliance on the work of family and neighbors, as I will discuss.<sup>152</sup> A combination of factors came into play beginning in the 1980s through the 1990s,

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<sup>151</sup> All of this being said, I was occasionally told by both men and women that women and girls in their particular families were not involved at all in farmwork; these were families, most often, of wealth and therefore living within a social context in which it was not appropriate for women to carry out physical labor, and their labor was not needed because labor could be hired. In the early twentieth century south, “[a] farmer whose wife did not need to work in the fields was a successful farmer” (Walker *Southern Farmers and Their Stories* 51). While I saw evidence of this belief system in Kentucky, historically there have been fewer large wealthy farms in Kentucky, and so this ideal may have been rarely reached. However, claims about work that women “didn’t do” should be understood within this context, so that we can assume that many women did in fact do “men’s work”—whether it was acknowledged or not.

<sup>152</sup> Ann E. Kingsolver, in her discussion of what she calls “strategic alterity” in one county in eastern Kentucky, argues that “tobacco ‘farmers’ have always relied on ‘farmworkers’ who have been defined as deserving or accepting of a low wage or no wages at all in a social and ideological context in which the labor contributions of those farmworkers may or may not have been acknowledged” (87).

resulting in the current situation in which the bulk of the physical work of raising tobacco came to be carried out by Hispanic workers, almost entirely male (as described in Chapter 2), rather than “local boys,” neighbors, and family members. The combination of factors that led to this have variously been described to me as: fewer children born on the farm, young people’s increased access to jobs in town (“flipping hamburgers”), children establishing careers off the farm, the inability to support an extended family on a single farm, an improved welfare system, a fallen work ethic, etc. In addition, farm income has not increased in proportion to the costs associated with farming. “As costs rise faster than prices, farm producers are faced with a decline in income” and often must choose between off-farm work or moving totally off the farm (Sachs 42).

Tobacco farmers gained the ability to lease quota in the early 70s, and they increasingly did so in order to maintain their farm incomes. They farmed more acres in order to make more money, which in turn meant the need for additional labor and/or mechanization.<sup>153</sup> The move to baling, the move from plant beds to float beds, more efficient tobacco setting technologies, and other innovations mechanized or made more efficient the jobs in which women were traditionally most involved. These innovations also condensed the tobacco work, so that depending on how much tobacco a farmer raises, he can manage it on his own most of the year, and needs outside help for shorter periods of time. The farmers that have the most stable source of labor are those that are

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<sup>153</sup> There is a certain level of self-conscious critique of the ever-increasing economy of scale. I heard multiple variants of the following joke:

“I guess it’s kinda like the guy that was selling watermelons [...] he had a truck of watermelons and he was buying them for a dollar and selling them for a dollar. And this guy asked him he said, “Man, how in the world are you making any money?” He said, “I don’t know”--He said, “I guess I’m gonna have to get a bigger truck” [...] So I guess you have to raise more tobacco.” (J. and K. Bond) It is possible to understand such stories and jokes as both self-critique and a critique of diversification efforts that have been pushed by various agricultural institutions.

large enough and diverse enough to need workers year-round. Many such farmers participate in the H2A program, legally hiring guest workers from Mexico under strict regulations, while others hire workers outside of the H2A program. Farmers who raise only smaller acreages of tobacco and have small to medium sized beef cattle operations have the hardest time finding labor because they only need help for short periods at the heights of the seasons mentioned above (and they all need it at roughly the same time).

At the same time that innovations were being introduced that made women's traditional jobs more efficient or eliminated them altogether, women were leaving the farm for jobs in town.<sup>154</sup> Acreages were growing at the same time, and operations were getting large enough that a family couldn't do all the work themselves (especially as children went away to school and didn't return to the farm) and therefore more labor had to be hired in. In addition, meals are now most often purchased rather than prepared, although most likely this changed once women began working off-farm, not before. Instead of full meals in the middle of the day, lunch (or "dinner") usually consists of sandwiches purchased from fast food establishments or made at lunchtime by the workers themselves, and different work arrangements dictate whether the farmer provides meals or not. These developments made it both possible and necessary for women to find and maintain jobs off the farm—which is not to imply that in many cases women and men were not already involved in paid off-farm activities. In many cases, women taught

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<sup>154</sup> Coughenour and Swanson discuss data from a 1979 survey of Kentucky farms which demonstrated that off-farm income both subsidized farm income and provided much needed cash flow. According to the authors, the loss of men's labor to off-farm jobs had a greater impact on farm productivity than the loss of women's labor. Of course, they were not taking the domestic sphere into consideration, nor the fact that when women take off-farm jobs they continue to be responsible for the house and children, and often continue to "help" with the farm activities.

school or did other kinds of full- or part-time paid work; many men worked at tobacco warehouses during the marketing season or had other part-time or seasonal jobs such as assessing crop damage. Women's roles in particular have certainly been class-dependent, as well as dependent on their marital status.

Madonna Hinton told me, "I think maybe the women may have gone [to off-farm jobs] first, to help pay the bills. And- this is the way I see it- and let the men stay home and do the farm work, but now it's come to the place they both gonna have to, and you can't pay for a farm with tobacco. Now." Here, Madonna, through her choice of words—that women "let" men do the farm work—suggests that men have stronger ties to raising tobacco, while women were willing to take off-farm jobs to support both the farm and their husbands' desire to be farmers. Women who didn't enjoy farming, or didn't enjoy tobacco farming in particular, welcomed the chance to move into "public jobs," as off-farm work is commonly called. During my fieldwork, I met a number of women who were thrilled to work off the farm (either because they were pursuing other careers or just didn't enjoy farm work), even though most continued to deeply value farm life and supported their husbands' choices to continue to farm. Many of these women continued to work in the tobacco and other farm activities in addition to work off the farm; others did not. According to Mike Carter:

I think that a lot of tobacco farmers [...] particularly with the larger ones, uh rather than the wife being involved in the production of the tobacco, or being a stay-at-home wife, she has off-farm employment and more often than not she may well be a professional person. A school teacher, a banker. [...] And you know there are exceptions, but. She's got a job or a position that is uh generating a significant portion of the family income. (8/23/07)

Women with public jobs also often either provide access to employer-sponsored health insurance or, if they work part time, earn enough income to cover privately purchased health insurance.

In a study of U.S. farm women's labor, Elise Boulding notes that, "farm wives and women farmers may be seen on a continuum with the housewife who happens to live on a farm but is not involved with it at all at one end, and the never married woman farmer who lives for her farm at the other end" (as quoted in Sachs 75). Interestingly, Boulding and other farm scholars base their categorizations of women involved in agriculture on their marital status. This continuum is helpful for an initial understanding of my observations—as is a similar continuum as applied to men—and although it is a continuum, the women I encountered can be approximately grouped into three categories. Although these are my categories, applied from the perspective of a researcher, I base them on my understanding of how the women I interacted with seem to categorize themselves.<sup>155</sup>

Some of the women that I met can be categorized as *women farmers*. Although this is somewhat problematic as a marked category separating "women farmers" from "(male) farmers," I borrow the term from usage in everyday language as well from programmatic use by institutions such as Cooperative Extension. Many in this category are women who farm with their husbands and take an active role on the farm, while others farm on their own or with others, without a male partner. I separate them from farmwives, as I think they do, because they may or may not participate in "farmwife"

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<sup>155</sup> The group Kentucky Women in Agriculture is so named precisely because of the existence of multiple categories and the group's attempt to be inclusive of all women involved in farming regardless of how they categorize themselves.



activities such as cooking large meals for farmhands, canning and freezing vegetables, etc., and because they have a larger role in farm decision-making than the traditional farmwife.<sup>156</sup> These are most often a younger generation of women than traditional farmwives, and include women who raise tobacco with their husbands as well as—more often—women who raise other crops. Such women are commonly active in farm organizations, including long-established organizations such as Farm Bureau, as well as (in the case of those raising something other than tobacco) more recently formed organizations dedicated to preserving family farms and/or the sustainable agriculture movement. This was the smallest group of women I had contact with.

In contrast, *farmwives*, usually self-described, are women whose primary realm is the farm household, but they also do some farm work as needed. As described above, they did tobacco work that included everything from pulling plants to stripping tobacco, and they also cooked large meals for hired hands and family, put up vegetables, etc. They have often been active members of Extension Homemaker's groups and the women's auxiliaries of farm organizations, rather than mixed gender groups. These are almost exclusively women of an older generation, and their roles as farmwives have changed as their husbands retired from farming.

In an interview in August 2005, Carolyn Taylor described to me the responsibilities that she had as a woman on a tobacco farm beginning in the late 1940s.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> See Virginia S. Fink's categorization of women on farms by age group. She found that "middle and younger women often stated that there were other women in the county who would be better examples of a farmwife because they were doing *more* or different kinds of chores on the farm. Some women in each age group were referred to as 'real.' These were women who continued to can or freeze large quantities of meat, or women who cared daily for many animals and worked regularly in the fields" (236).

<sup>157</sup> As an example of the blurring of these categories, however, although I am describing Carolyn Taylor as a farm wife based on our conversations and interview, she also taught school and once her daughters grew up she went on to receive a Master's degree and continued teaching.

As a “town girl,” Carolyn, after marrying a tobacco farmer, “was determined to be a good farmer’s wife,” as she told me, and she learned to work in the tobacco. During the housing season, for instance, after picking up leaves left in the field after the men had been through cutting and spearing, she and her daughters resumed their work in the house. She told me (as quoted in Chapter 2):

So early in the morning we would, go to the field. The girls and I, and we’d pick up any, leaves that we thought were good. And this is when we were not on poundage see this is when we were on acreage and you wanted to get every bit of tobacco off of the field that you could. So we’d go and we’d pick them up [...] and brought it in, the barn and then we’d, we’d come to the house and start cookin.’ And get ready for the men that were—‘course we had a lot of help during housing, see. We’ve had as many as thirteen men here, help, ‘cause we had a lot of tobacco at one time. [...] Yeah and we’d have to give them their dinner, see, that was part of it.

Carolyn went on to describe the kinds of meals she and her daughters cooked, first describing in great detail the recipe for refrigerator rolls that she kept ready at all times, and then the other foods that might be part of these dinners:

I’d have fried chicken or baked chicken or sometimes I’d have ham and sometimes we’d grill out hamburgers. [...] I usually didn’t have too much cold cuts or sandwiches because...they were really hungry when they came in after working hard all morning and. So we’d just have a good, big meal. [...] And you know I could cook mashed potatoes in, five or six minutes in a pressure sauce pan. So I kept two of ‘em going, one for potatoes and one for, say green beans or whatever other vegetables that I needed to cook fast and [...] But we’d have tomatoes and corn on the cob, things in the summer. ‘Cause you know we had the garden. And we’d get them all fed we— We had a big table outside where we’d take. Big pans of hot water and soap and towels and they could wash outside and then we had picnic tables outside where they could eat out there. [...] Course they didn’t have [a] dishwasher then, in those days, and we had to wash all those dishes and dry ‘em and put ‘em away you know and. Then after dinner, after we got our meal and cleaned up and the kitchen cleaned up, we’d go to the barn and tie up the leaves.

Women in this category often deferred to their husbands during interviews, particularly on questions related to tobacco, or excused themselves from interviews altogether, “discredit[ing] their own contributions to the farm operation and delegitimiz[ing] their own labor” (Ramírez-Ferrero 105).

A third category of women that I met were *women married to farmers*, women who described themselves as having public jobs and little or no role on the farm. Most of the wives of tobacco farmers under retirement age that I met were in this category. Mike Carter told me: “I can’t think of a, of a farming situation, that I’m aware of even here or in neighboring counties or, anywhere where there- what I would consider a large tobacco grower where their wife is actively involved in that. Now, when they switch to vegetables more typically you would see both spouses involved in it. Sometimes with the lady taking a lead” (8/23/07). Many of the women I met and interviewed in this category were in their fifties or younger, and many were town girls who married farmers; many were excited as young women to work on the farm with their husbands, but soon tired of it and pursued off-farm careers.

The pattern of women working on the farm early in their marriages and then moving into public jobs is a pattern noted by scholars of women and farming (cf. Rosenfeld and Tiggs 182). These women describe themselves as completely uninvolved on the farm. In many cases, however, they do participate in farm work in emergencies or when their husbands have no other help available, another example of women downplaying their importance on the farm. In many cases, their husbands, too, undervalue the work of women on the farm. These women are generally interested in maintaining a rural lifestyle, but some would prefer that their husbands stop raising

tobacco, either because of the health effects of tobacco use or because of the stress and hard work of tobacco production compared to other farm activities. Many described tobacco as a sticky, dirty crop. They described the sweaty stickiness of walking through tobacco fields during such tasks as topping—which usually takes place during the hottest part of the summer, so tobacco residue coats not only the hands used to break the tops off the plants, but the entire body. I was told vivid details of pulling plants from plant beds before the days of water beds—another dirty and uncomfortable job, this one requiring being bent over for long periods, often balanced on a board stretched across the bed in order to avoid crushing the plants. In her study of oral history interviews with Southern farmers, Melissa Walker found that “women also proved especially likely to articulate a hatred for farm life” (Southern Farmers and Their Stories 141). Although the women I am categorizing as women married to farmers did not often express “hatred” of farm life, many did express a deep dislike for farm work, tobacco work in particular.

In addition to this continuum based on women’s relationships with men, it is also helpful to reverse the premise and categorize men in terms of their relationships with women. Although this, too, is best understood as a continuum, there are two primary categories of male farmers with whom I interacted over the course of my research (excluding retired farmers). The first are those married to women with public jobs; these men farm tobacco and cattle (and related forage crops) almost exclusively. These are *tobacco farmers* who profess that they will most likely continue to raise tobacco as long as there is a market and they can come out ahead; they are often described in emic terms as *tobacco men*, as I will discuss. The second category is men with wives (or in one case I will describe in the next chapter, a daughter) with active roles on the farm; in many

cases these couples have moved away from tobacco and into other crops. They are *diversified farmers*. Reversing the premise of the continuum suggested by Elise Boulding highlights the role that women are playing in this transitional period, in a way that categorizing only women does not.<sup>158</sup> These categories, too, would be recognizable to those in them even though, like the categories of women, there are exceptions to my rigid categorization. I will return to diversified farmers in the next chapter; here I will focus on tobacco men.

In terms of the gendered division of labor, tobacco farms are not really very different from other kinds of farms, whether conventional, alternative, or organic (as I will discuss in the next chapter). Although the gendered division of labor has been a major focus of scholarship in rural sociology, history, and related fields, it represents only one means of considering gender on the farm; the examination of relationships with crops and livestock is another, though less researched, means of approaching gender and farming. Much of the scholarship that examines farming through a lens of gender looks rather generically at farming, usually in a particular region or time period, without attention to the crops and/or livestock being raised by the farmers in the studies. For instance, Eric Ramírez-Ferrero, in his study of the implications for Oklahoma men of 1980s farm crisis, notes that his informants recognize the category of farmer as male even though they acknowledge that women can do much of the work—with the exception of “heavy lifting” which he notes there is not much of (106). He does not include any discussion of how work may differ dependent on the crop being produced. A study such

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<sup>158</sup> It is interesting to note, in reference to these “continuums,” that one study found that the two “most satisfied” groups of farmers are 1) married farm men whose wives work public jobs and 2) unmarried, independent, women farmers (Rosenfeld and Tigges 182).

as this one, in which social relationships are changing in the context of changes in the status of tobacco farming, calls attention to the relationship between gender and the particular configurations of the work required for a particular crop. In the preceding pages, I have demonstrated that women's relationships with tobacco have changed.

There are of course exceptions, but for the most part because women have either pursued careers off the farm or have moved to other crops, women's relationships with tobacco have largely ended.<sup>159</sup> In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine the relationships that male farmers have with this crop and the ways in which the mastery of cultural practices surrounding its production serve as a means through which to perform a particular masculine identity.

### **Tobacco Production as Traditionalized Masculine Performance**

Although the traditions of men have long been a prime focus of folklore scholarship, the marking of men's traditions as gendered has, with a handful of exceptions, been a recent undertaking. Works by Stanley Brandes, Roger Abrahams (*The Man-of-Words*), and Richard Bauman all serve as important examples of the examination of the verbal art of men as expressions of masculinity. Folklorists such as Gary Alan Fine and Simon

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<sup>159</sup> There are important exceptions to this, of course. One is Alice Baesler, mentioned throughout this dissertation, who raises 300 acres of tobacco. Although her husband now works beside her in this, for many years she raised it on her own when he was a mayor and then a congressman. She is often cited by extension agents and farmers when I ask about women tobacco farmers; she's the example given because she is well known and raises so much tobacco. She is in many ways, however the exception that proves the rule; her self-consciousness of being an exception and the fact that she is the example given serves to reinforce the maleness of raising tobacco. Alice is also a founding member of Kentucky Women in Agriculture and Partners for Family Farms, both of which are organizations otherwise with memberships almost exclusively made up of "diversified farmers." When I asked her about this seeming contradiction, she told me that if she were younger she would move away from tobacco to sustainable food crops, but this is not a realistic option for her, financially, at this stage of her life. I met less than a handful of couples in which the woman considered herself actively involved in the tobacco, but of course they represent others.

Bronner have more recently addressed masculinity, but have largely offered psychoanalytical and sociological readings that, while perhaps provocative, do little to further our understanding of gender as a performance. They are more interested in *expressions* of masculinity than in masculinity as performance, by which I mean that although they describe gender as a construction, they seem to maintain a naturalized concept of gender. For instance, Fine describes ideas such as “hustling” and “maturity” that Little League boys are expected to demonstrate in order to prove their manhood to one another and their coaches. Importantly, Fine points out that these ideas are never defined for them. He argues that therefore boys are acting out their “folk ideas” (see Dundes “Folk Ideas”) of masculinity, formed through models of masculinity found in the media and through observation of role models, rather than any actual masculinity. So while Fine understands masculinity as constructed, he assumes that there is an essential masculinity that exists in the world independent of folk ideas of masculinity.

Fine’s concept of masculinity as constructed but yet somehow *real* contrasts markedly with an understanding of gender as a performance, most notably theorized by Judith Butler, who questions the assumption that there is an intrinsic and stable (real) gender identity. Fine’s descriptions of the expectations boys face might better be understood through what Butler understands as “regulatory practices” of normative gender ideals, ideals that are then treated as merely descriptive. She states, “In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (33).

Simon Bronner begins his 2005 collection, Manly Traditions: The Folk Roots of American Masculinity, with an important assertion: that men’s traditions—as expressions

of masculinity—need to be recognized and studied because men have been studied but not *as men*. However, his perspective depends on an essentialized understanding of masculinity conceptualized within a framework of mourning lost ideas of manhood, as he demonstrates in his introduction to the volume: “For all the reminders that men are different from women in ways other than anatomy, the distinctive cultural traditions that contribute to a conveyable sense of masculinity still need definition, especially in an era when manliness, if given consideration, is often criticized and suppressed” (xii). He not only ignores the consequences of male power, he “question[s] common assumptions of male privilege and dominance” (xvii).

Importantly, however, Bronner contextualizes manly practices and behaviors as “traditions,” and many of the contributors to his volume offer interesting accounts of “manly traditions.” While this seems a small point, it is significant because it opens the door for putting the gender theory of Butler next to folkloristic theories of tradition. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin have argued against the assumption, in both scholarly and “commonsense” definitions of tradition, that tradition is a bounded and natural object. They argue that there is no stable core or naturalist existence that exists in reality; instead, “tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present” (Handler and Linneken 276).

A decade before Handler and Linneken, Dell Hymes described something similar when he argued that tradition should be understood as rooted not in time but in social life and in process; this is better suggested, Hymes argued, in the term to “traditionalize.” Like Handler and Linnekin, Hymes challenges the notion of tradition as *the way things always were* which, Handler and Linnekin argue, becomes naturalized and unquestioned.



Instead, traditional practices and traditional ideologies are performed in “an ongoing reconstruction of tradition [...] which is not natural but symbolically constituted” (276). By combining the theory of Butler, Hymes, and Handler and Linnekin, gender can be understood as *traditionalized performance*. Such performances are rhetorical, in that they work to sustain normative gendered practices, roles, and spaces.

In contrast, Bronner frames his volume in terms of “question[s] of what national conditions as well as local contexts allow or curtail the expression of manliness” (xiv), and he seems to mourn the loss (or the movement “underground” xiv) of hypermasculine traditions. Understanding gender as traditionalized performance provides the opportunity to look at “change” as a meta-discourse about gender and to examine implicit evaluations. In other words, change marks a reconfiguration, not an absence; some changes are accompanied by discourses of loss, and some are not. Rather than accepting the loss of an essentialized masculinity, I am interested in understanding the complex connections between gender and nostalgia, how nostalgia discourses are complicit with gender discourses.

Such a perspective raises questions such as: Are there particular performances and practices that define a man who raises tobacco? How have the changing contexts of tobacco production changed what it means to be a man who raises tobacco? Are there practices and performances that serve to separate such men from men who raise other crops? From women? Are there practices that might be understood as “regulatory practices”—rhetorical practices—that in fact serve to keep men from raising other crops? How has the growing stigma surrounding the crop and those who raise it—and the associated loss of social power—affected the performance of masculine identity? In

investigating these questions, I look to multiple sites in the hope of moving beyond the examination of single genres as most of the scholarship I have just mentioned relies upon, to connect multiple threads of performance. How is a masculine identity built through the performance of multiple practices, in multiple contexts?

Although tobacco products are not the subject of this study, it is important to point out that historically, tobacco use has generally been understood as a privilege of manhood—at least until the development of the modern cigarette industry and the discovery of women as a vast group of untapped consumers. Scholars such as Michael Kimmel have argued that American masculinity grew out of a nineteenth century desire to separate from Europe in terms of culture and tradition; European models of manhood had come to be viewed as effeminate, and American men invented their own model, which Kimmel calls the “Self-Made Man” in which “[t]he contrast with European manhood was a constant theme” (17). Tobacco-using practices were one way that American men differentiated themselves from effeminate Europeans. For instance, W.F. Axton describes the “American backwoodsmen” who did not smoke a pipe like his European counterparts. Instead,

A freeborn American such as he required his own culture and tastes—and his own way of enjoying the leaf he was raising. What more simple than to adapt to his own purposes the ancient Indian practice of twisting leaves of tobacco tightly together into a thick rope about a foot long, which was then back-braided upon itself into a neat package suitable for an overalls pocket? Biting off a piece made a ‘chaw.’ (58)

Here and elsewhere, Axton, like other writers of tobacco history, tells a story of tobacco that is thoroughly masculine, from Colonial planters and the English merchants to whom they sold their crops, through the small planters moving west and “settling” Kentucky, through the Black Patch Wars and control of the industry by Big Tobacco. Although, certainly women—primarily immigrant women and poor rural women—had always used tobacco in small numbers, it was not until the 1920s, through the advertising efforts of the major cigarette companies, that tobacco use, in the form of smoking, became an acceptable female practice.<sup>160</sup>

Cultural images of tobacco use in male-only spaces abound, most notably in the image of “smoke-filled rooms” in which important decisions are made by powerful men. The connection between homosocial male spaces and tobacco does not end with tobacco use, however. Tobacco warehouses were once thoroughly male spaces in which men performed for one another; such spaces were dominated by men—warehousemen and their employees, tobacco company buyers, auctioneers, and government graders were all men. At one time, during the sales season, marketing towns became centers of male excess in which card playing and hard drinking sometimes led to the loss of part or even all of a year’s worth of hard-earned tobacco money. Women’s roles were limited to occasionally accompanying their husbands on the day of sale, sometimes serving, along with their children, as props to remind buyers that a pile of tobacco represented a family that depended on that tobacco as their sole source of cash.

The men who filled tobacco warehouses were “tobacco men,” a term that I have encountered in both written and oral sources and which at one level references all men

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<sup>160</sup> Smoking pipes and cigars, and of course chewing, have remained less acceptable forms of tobacco use for women in the US.

involved in tobacco production. Over the years, the term was used fairly regularly in the Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter, in such contexts as “One of the most discussed questions among the tobacco men is, ‘What to do with respect to allotted acres’” (Kentucky Marketing Bulletin January 1946, 1). In his 1947 narrative of life and work as a Kentucky tobacco farmer, Virgil Steed notes that “Local farm tenants call themselves ‘tobaccomen’” (43).

More importantly, the term describes a social category that sums up the traits of an idealized masculinity. Wendell Berry described the import of the category in a 1991 essay:

As a boy and a young man, I worked with men who were as fiercely insistent on the ways and standards of their discipline as artists—which is what they were. In those days, to be recognized as a “tobacco man” was to be accorded an honor such as other cultures bestowed on the finest hunters or warriors or poets. The accolade “He’s a *tobacco* man!” would be accompanied by a shake of the head to indicate that such surpassing excellence was, finally, a mystery; there was more to it than met the eye. (Berry 54)

I encountered the term in use orally as well, in reference to particular farmers in this same way that Berry uses it, with reverence and respect. One way to understand *tobacco men*, as a category, is to again utilize Harvey Sacks’ concept of “category-bound activities”: “Category, plus category-bound activity bound to that category” (584). In this case, there are particular practices (or activities) that, when carried out in certain ways have, through a process of traditionalization, come together to form a performed identity, carrying status and expectations, that designates the performer as a *tobacco man*.

What makes one a *tobacco man* is the performance of activities and practices that have, through a process of traditionalization, come to define the category. This concept

takes us beyond a homogenized view of “what it means to be a man,” or the construction of some generic masculinity, to an investigation of particularized masculinities created through performance in particular contexts. The performance of *tobacco man* differs not only from that of *diversified farmer*, but from other categories of farmers such as Iowa corn farmers and from other categories of men based on occupation or other traditionalized masculine identities such as commercial fishermen and stone carvers, as I will mention. Ramírez-Ferrero argues, “If we want to more completely understand the experience of farm men—their positioning for crisis and the cultural construction of pride—we must examine farm management practices and their implications for gender, identity, and occupational role evaluation in the context of these historical changes” (108). Here, I am interested in how the category of “tobacco man” has been produced based on particular activities that tobacco farmers then perform, in order to acquire the status or reputation that makes one deserving of being viewed by other tobacco men as a tobacco man. Further, I am interested in what is happening to this category as circumstances change in tobacco country. The cultural practices that come together to create “tobacco men,” and the consequences of the perception of the demise of the tobacco man, are central to an understanding of the changes taking place in tobacco production and therefore in tobacco communities.

Michael Kimmel has argued that “American men define their masculinity not as much in relation to women, but in relation to one another. Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment” (5).<sup>161</sup> As I have previously described, the display of one’s

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<sup>161</sup> Importantly, Kimmel is not arguing that women are irrelevant to performed masculinity; women, too, serve as an audience for masculinity and Kimmel argues that the female audience may be real or may be an “idea” of women.

tobacco at sales time serves as both the means through which a sale is made and as a performance of tobacco aesthetics; as I described in Chapter 2, there are differing opinions on whether or not how your tobacco looked affected your sale price (and this continues as a subject of dispute today). When tobacco was still being tied into hands, a farmer made sure that his hands were carefully placed in the tobacco baskets when it was unloaded, often waiting long periods for the warehouse employee he preferred, for his ability to make the tobacco look its best. Charles Long compared this performance with his work in a factory:

Charles Long: Course I worked 31 years at ... for a company up in a, Elizabethtown [...] We made silicone caulk, and our plant manager said uh... “You know all these years” ... “we’ve been mak[ing] this guy a Cadillac and really all he wanted was a Ford.” So, I mean. Those hands didn’t have to be tied just perfect. It didn’t have to lay on that basket just perfect.

Ann: So that wadn’t for the tobacco companies, that you were doing that?

Charles: Naww. [...] They could say “That’s my tobacco. That’s mine” [...] “See how many pounds I got per acre. See what my price was.”

Charlene Long: It was pride in themselves.

“Pride” is consistently used to reference a central attribute of this category, a demonstration of a mastery of particular knowledge and skills; not having pride excludes the farmer from the category. Ramírez-Ferrero identified a similar symbolic importance of the use of “pride” in reference to male farmers in his interviews with Oklahoma farmers, “to explain social action that was generative and positive—as a force of production: a man’s diligence in his work, his careful nurturance of the land, and maintenance of the family property” (60). He goes on, “Implicit in pride then, were

culturally defined and prescribed ideas about gender and role expectations” (60). The care tobacco men took with their tobacco may or may not have affected the price for which their tobacco sold, but according to Charles, at one time they believed that it did.<sup>162</sup> They also understood that it affected their identity as tobacco men, a performed identity that depended on displaying tobacco that was of high quality and was neatly packaged and presented.

Maurice Corn: They, some people could make the, the messiest- you ever saw. But a lot of people really, I have uh, seen crops where every hand was the same and, prettyest you ever saw. But they don’t- The buyers wouldn’t give you a bit more than that than they will the other.

Ann: Oh really?

Corn: No

Ann: So it didn’t help your price?

Corn: Didn’t help your price but it, but a lot of people just, you know, didn’t like sloppy tobacco.

While, of course, all tobacco men wanted to be paid high prices for obvious economic reasons, they also benefited from gaining “bragging rights,” as several farmers called the ability to talk about the average price they received.<sup>163</sup> “It was a a neighborhood thing

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<sup>162</sup> Based on what I’ve learned from former warehousemen and one former buyer, a neat and pretty crop probably did bring a higher price at one time, but only if that crop was what particular buyers wanted. Ben Crain, who was at one time a buyer for R.J. Reynolds, and for many years a tobacco warehouseman, told me: “There were kinds of burley tobacco in ... [...the] late 60s that, that um, could be, very very long and silky, almost silky looking. And that wadn’t the kind of tobacco Reynolds wanted. I mean farmers loved it because it- and I did too because it was *beautiful*, it was absolutely *beautiful*. Long, uh beautifully hand-tied and, and presented and, but it wadn’t the kind of tobacco that Reynolds wanted. For their products.” (12-17-07) In my one experience with a tobacco buyer at a Philip Morris receiving station, it was clear that he admired the tobacco being sold by the farmers I was with, but unclear whether or not this affected his grading and pricing. Because the grade is fully dependent on a visual inspection the appearance may still have some impact on the price, however small.

<sup>163</sup> In some families, however, tobacco prices were a well-guarded secret.

and a family thing, you wanted to have the highest selling crop. For two reasons you know to brag about it during the year and also, made you a little bit more money” (Souder). Having messy tobacco continues to reflect negatively on a grower’s identity and reputation. The aesthetics that had applied to hands of tobacco moved to bales, and in many stripping rooms tobacco is placed in the bale box neatly, in alternating layers, with the stems of the leaves butted up against the sides of the bale in order to form a uniform bale without leaves hanging out. During my visit to a receiving station, I witnessed men ensuring that their best bales were on the top of the pile and that the piles were neatly formed. The complexity of the movement is evident in this exchange from a 2008 interview with Martin Henson:

Martin: No, I’ve seen, tobacco come in, that, just as slick and pretty and, baled you know? And then I’ve seen some come in just ragged and the leaves a hangin’ everywhere, bring the same money.

Ann: Really?

Martin: Yeah. The, the quality’s gone, it’s gone.

Ann: What would your father say about that?

Martin: I imagine he’d turn over. [*both laugh*] Yeah he, he was pretty, he was pretty- ‘Course back there then, quality amounted to something

Ann: Yeah. Did it-

Martin: You know two or three cents on the pound.

Ann: Did it?

Martin: Yeah

Martin clearly equates the aesthetics of tobacco bales with quality and with price.



Warehouses were male performance spaces, appropriately filled with performance at the height of the year, when men were getting paid for their crop, but performance lasted all year, and while the gendering of tobacco in such contexts is observable (men judging other men based on work almost exclusively performed by men) but unarticulated, at other times it is articulated in surprisingly clear terms. Writing about raising Kentucky tobacco in the 1940s, Virgil Steed noted that “A common local description is ‘he’s so tough he bites the heads off tobacco worms,’ and country boys delight in trying to convince their city playmates that the men kill the worms by doing just that. With much pantomime, they illustrate the gruesome details” (136). In other words, according to Steed, boys often performed this folk saying—probably as both prank and to demonstrate a contrast between “country” and “city” ideals of masculinity, in which the country boy is more masculine than urban (effeminate) playmates.

Tobacco also plays a central role in coming of age narratives. Being old enough to have your own tobacco patch was practically a universal experience shared with me by farmers—nearly universal for men, but rare for women. Some men were as young as nine and others in their teens, but nearly all the men I interviewed either mentioned in passing or described in narrative form, being given a small part of their father’s crop to raise once they’d reached a certain age. They were then responsible for that portion of the crop, and they received all or part of the profit; many young men paid their way through college this way. Although girls were rarely given their own patch of tobacco, one story I was told demonstrates the symbolic power of the first tobacco patch. A woman from a tobacco family told me that after she was divorced she raised a small patch of tobacco on her own, doing all of the work by herself. This, along with the first

time she fixed her car herself, served as a symbol for her that she could make it on her own following her divorce, demonstrating the confluence of work usually carried out by men and the performance of independence.

Cutting tobacco is another obviously male cultural practice that, when carried out, becomes performance. One farmer told me that what used to make a boy a man was how many sticks of tobacco he could cut; 1000 sticks made you a man. The following description of cutting, one that I included in Chapter 2 from an interview with Garrard County farmers Jonathon Shell and his grandfather, G.B. Shell, demonstrates how this practice is understood as masculine performance:

Jonathon: You know you just don't come out and pick up a tobacco knife and start cuttin' tobacco. You know, tobacco is such a brittle, um, plant, you know you- you gotta get it on a certain position on the stalk, you know maybe not the exact position, but you gotta get it in the right position where that you don't split the stalk out and it just fall right off the stick, you've gotta, have your stamina up enough to where you can cut a hundred and fifty, sticks in a row-

G.B.: or two hundred-

Jonathon: Or two hundred or three hundred even. [...] And the main thing is stamina and form [...]

G.B.: It's kinda like basketball or football, the best guys, win.

Ann: Well what makes the best guy?

G.B.: Strength.

Jonathon: Stamina. (1/22/2008)

Here, cutting is compared to competitive sporting events and words like “stamina,” “form,” and “strength”—masculine words, with potentially sexual connotations—are used to describe what is needed in order to do it well.

Men often reminisce about cutting tobacco when they were young, racing brothers or friends down the rows. Informal competition in the tobacco field led to formalized cutting contests in which performance was central rather than a secondary function. The audience was no longer limited to other cutters, but included possibly hundreds of spectators. In our discussion of the Garrard County Tobacco Cutting Contest, extension agent Mike Carter told me, “we’ve had very few people enter that are not good cutters. Because, most of them are aware of the level of competition and they don’t want to embarrass themselves” (8/23/07). Such contests formalized accepted understandings of what it meant to be the best tobacco cutter, and therefore to perform one’s masculinity for others in a meta-performance. As I discussed in Chapter 2, “best” and “fastest” cutter are not synonymous, and cutting contest organizers have developed very detailed scoring systems that take not only speed but accuracy and neatness into account. According to Carter, conversations about who was the best cutter took place, prior to the establishment of the Garrard County Tobacco Cutting Contest, at “the little country stores, and poolrooms, and you know, Farm Bureau meetings” (8/23/07). The Garrard County contest started during the height of consciousness about tobacco farming as heritage, but also as the labor situation was beginning to change, leading to the current dependence on Hispanic men to do the cutting. Because the future of tobacco was uncertain, the skills of the tobacco cutter were in danger, leading to the celebration of these skills and the men who demonstrated them. The contest continues today, and it may take on new meanings as tobacco farmers themselves do less cutting. More and more Hispanic men are in fact entering the contest each year, and they are not universally welcomed. I have to wonder if the day that Hispanic workers outnumber white cutters will mean the end of the

contest. The end of the contest under such circumstances would not just be about racism (although of course it would be), it would also be about having a contest in which “we” are performing for each other the skills that have made us men for generations. This serves to point out that, for whites, “tobacco man” is a white category.

Men are so associated with cutting—or rather associate themselves with cutting so strongly—that it was not until the 2007 cutting season that I realized that most of the men I had been talking with, interviewing, and sometimes working beside, no longer actually cut any tobacco themselves. This is due in part to the aging of farmers; because cutting tobacco is so strenuous men cut less tobacco the older they get, and as there are fewer young farmers it follows that fewer farmers cut their own tobacco. However, tobacco farmers cut less of their own crop today because many of them are growing much more tobacco than they once did and therefore spending more time in a management role. This is one changing cultural practice that exemplifies the changing relationship with the crop that I will turn to below, as farmers oversee large acreages of tobacco production rather than doing the work of a small patch themselves.

Meanwhile, however, their language continues to connect them directly to the task, as I would be told things like “I [or We] hope to start cutting next week” or “You’re welcome to come back when we’re cutting.” Although I was fully aware that workers were hired during cutting season, I later realized that I had assumed from their self-inclusive language that the farmers were cutting beside the hired men. My assumptions were also based on the fact that many of these same farmers physically participated in other aspects of production, such as setting and topping. One younger farmer was an exception to the general inarticulation of current practices (more readily articulating

changing practices), telling me over the phone several times throughout the cutting season that he has a crew of Hispanic workers cutting, and that he doesn't actually cut much anymore—*that's all changed, you watch the Mexicans cut the tobacco now and they tear it up*, he told me.

Tobacco men traditionally competed in other forums as well. Jerry Bond told me,

Well, farmers competed among themselves to have the best crop. [...] You know if somebody would maybe learn a little something, maybe about how to do something a little bit better? They wouldn't share that secret, with, with their neighbor farmers. They were gonna keep that to theirself because that gave them an edge, to have a better tobacco crop than their neighbor had. Therefore that gave them bragging rights, you know in the community, "I's the best tobacco farmer in this community." (9/15/05)

In the days of the tobacco program, there was a certain amount of competition among farmers to be chosen to raise someone's crop and a resulting pride in the number of farms on which you were raising tobacco. This varied by region, based on available quota. For quota owners who stood to receive a percentage of the income from the crop, there was an obvious advantage in working with a good tobacco man; however, by the end of the program, quotas were rented on a per-pound basis, rather than a percentage of what the crop brought, so this may have lessened the degree of competition.

At the same time that I often heard about competition among farmers, I also heard a competing narrative about *community*: how everyone used to help each other by sharing work and knowledge, by giving each other leftover plants, and so on. Such narratives argue that this sense of community is gone. Melissa Walker argues that "rural Southerners have developed something of a collective mythology about the communities of the past," a mythology that ignores community strife or difference (Southern Farmers

and Their Stories 196). Pat Mullen points out, in his discussion of the life history narratives of a Southern Ohio farmer, that “[i]ndividual success and achievement orientation through competition” in this farmer’s narratives are “balanced by a countertheme, cooperation” (Listening to Old Voices 125). In Mullen’s example, this farmer is proud of the individual successes achieved by his grandfather, but also stresses the importance of farmers working together in threshing rings, barn building, and other communal activities. So while Walker may be correct—and perhaps neighborly competition by tobacco farmers is ignored as they reflect on the past—as Mullen suggests, there may also be elements here of the co-existence of seemingly competing values, differently applied under different circumstances. I frequently witnessed farmers giving each other advice, leaning on their pickups. The giving of advice—and being viewed by other farmers as having worthy advice to give—is itself a performance of a tobacco man identity.

Aesthetic-based performances are also not limited to the sales season. Because a field of tobacco is in plain sight it becomes a performance space. According to Diana Taylor, her father, and other men, drove the tractor during setting time not just because it took physical strength to control, but because the straightness of the rows—a public performance written on the landscape—is a point of male pride. According to Ramírez-Ferrero, “evaluations” of how a farm looks serve as physical manifestations of good decision making” and pride; a farm is “a text that could be easily read by anyone versed in the language of farming” (112). Pete Daniel has written, “...farmers always associated crooked rows with sorry people” (67).

One farmer that I worked closely with has a field of tobacco located right next to a well-traveled county highway, and he is very aware of how closely this field is watched: “Everybody in the country watches that piece of ground.” And a lot has happened on this piece of ground. One year part of it flooded, and much of the tobacco in that portion of the field was lost. Another year, he missed a couple of rows when he was spraying sucker control which meant those rows of plants grew enormous suckers, observable from the road. In the drought of 2007, all of his tobacco in that field died after he had set it, and he had to reset it. With each event, he told me, everyone had a comment to make.

In the summer of 2007, I was in this field with this farmer a number of times, and it became clear that I, too, was talked about. One day, he was setting tobacco in that field, and I rode behind him on the tractor. When we went to get a sandwich at the nearby convenient store where farmers from that part of the county congregate at lunch time, it was suggested to him that I be given an umbrella to hold over his head in order to shade him from the sun. Not only would my holding an umbrella provide me with a practical purpose for riding behind this farmer on his tractor (replacing the questionable purpose of being a young woman doing research about tobacco farming), it would also ensure that my role was subservient. The thinly veiled references to this farmer’s younger days of carousing underscored the gendered meaning of the comment.

This field is indeed a male performance space (as was the convenient store), and I had entered it as a woman; my place in this space was a gendered place, and I was expected to play a gendered role in it (and I did). According to Michael Kimmel, “the evaluative eyes of other men are always upon [men], watching, judging” (5), and I

experienced other instances in which men acknowledged being monitored by or monitoring other men. For instance, farmers often remarked about the state of neighboring farms—the neatness of the landscape, the care (or lack of) with which other farmers treated their equipment, the straightness of rows, and of course the health of other farmers’ tobacco, were all subject to judgment.

One day, I was riding with a farmer in his forties, and we passed a young man in an old farm truck trying to open a gate by lightly butting it with the front bumper of his truck rather than getting out of the truck to open it. The farmer with whom I was riding commented that *that* was what he meant by “laziness,” a topic we’d discussed that day—that farmers are lazy now compared with how they once were (a topic I will return to below). He then told me that, when he was a young man, if there were three guys riding in a pick-up together it was best to sit on the outside, next to the door, because that made you the “cowboy”—the one who got out and opened and closed the gates. The guy in the middle was therefore called the “cowgirl.” He laughed at this punch line, and then he said that today’s young men are happy to be cowgirls.<sup>164</sup>

The examples I have just described demonstrate a rigid understanding of gender as a dichotomous concept as well as rhetorical practices that reinscribe gendered norms. If you are not performing “cowboy” then you can only be a “cowgirl.” There is no in-between. Peter et al. argue that what they term “monologic masculinity” is “a conventional masculinity with rigid expectations and strictly negotiated performances

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<sup>164</sup> My thanks to Pat Mullen for pointing out the similarity between the practice described here and the wider-known practice of “riding shotgun,” in which young men will “call shotgun” when getting in the car with other men in order to claim the front passenger seat. Although the “cowboy/cowgirl” scenario I describe here is different in that there was a specific task involved (the opening and closing of the gate), the two practices have in common not only references to cowboys but an effort to achieve or maintain a position of higher (masculine) status (however temporary).



that provide a clear distinction between men's and women's work" in contrast to a "dialogic masculinity," "a broader understanding of what it is to be a man" (216). A central aspect of monologic masculinity on the farm, according to Peter et al., is "a fascination with big machines that control the environment" (226).

The association of men and machinery is widely acknowledged in common discourse as well—"men and their toys" is a common expression in many contexts, with references to shiny new farm machinery as well as race cars and power tools. Tobacco farming complicates these associations, however. Tobacco farmers certainly have their large trucks (mostly Ford F-250s and 350s). However, Kentucky tobacco farmers have traditionally been small farmers who cannot afford (and may not need) large new equipment, and so their tractors are often old; for this reason, there is often more masculine pride in being able to keep your equipment running well than in having a shiny new tractor. In addition, as I have discussed, burley tobacco remains a hands-on crop, unlike either the flue-cured tobacco of the Carolina region or the grains and row crops grown by farmers in other parts of the country. For this reason as well, machinery is less a source of pride than hard physical labor. Tobacco farmers often compare themselves with farmers to the west, who, from their perspective, spend their days riding in air-conditioned tractor cabs. This is often commented on in relation to the hilly Kentucky landscape and traditionally small farms. As a result of the tobacco buyout, farmers in other areas are trying to raise burley tobacco for the first time, and one farmer told me that many of them have not done well and won't be raising it again:

[A] lot of those are use[d to]- either flue-cured tobacco where they harvest it with a combine or they're used to running corn and beans where they set in a combine,

they're not used to having that much labor. The money sounds good until you realize how much labor is involved and how much risk is involved, and how much money has to be put out up front. In order to hope that there's a crop at the end. So, some of those people are realizing- Where we don't have that option- We don't have those big, huge thousand acres that we can go out here and rent and put in corn and, go over it in a few days and be through. (M. Roberts)

To burley tobacco farmers, the performance of hard physical labor is a source of masculinity more than big machines because so much physical labor is required. This points again to multiple masculinities based on region, crop, and other contextual details. However, this also points to the changes taking place as tobacco farms increase in size, since many tobacco men are doing less and less of the fieldwork; instead they farm from the cabs of their pickup trucks more and more. Many of the contexts of performance I have just described are largely gone or are drastically changed. The performance of masculinity has become so commensurable with tobacco production that nostalgia for tobacco production and nostalgia for a masculinity of a former age are difficult to untangle. This suggests that the commensurability of pride and hard labor may decline as tobacco men do less and less of the work themselves and as labor shifts more completely to Hispanic workers.

### **Nostalgia for a Golden Age of Masculinity**

When I started this project, my assumptions were largely formed by public nostalgia discourses which mourn the end of tobacco and “the death of a culture” (Warren). My fieldwork of course led me to a more complex story than what was being presented in the media the year following the tobacco buyout, when many farmers were getting out, and I was beginning my research.

In 2004, Kentucky photographer James Baker Hall and poet and author Wendell Berry published Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy, a book of photographs taken by Hall during a 1973 tobacco harvest that took place on a farm neighboring Berry's farm, and in which Berry and members of his family participated. Like the photographs, Berry's essay is moving and deeply personal. He describes the lives of those in the photographs and the role that tobacco played in these lives, in a voice that makes it clear that he is speaking to dual audiences, both outsiders who know nothing of tobacco harvests and those who know it intimately and whom he expects will join him in mourning. For the photographs together with the accompanying essay are to be read, according to the title, as a "mournful poem" ("Elegy") about the end of Kentucky's tobacco farming tradition, an end that Berry argues began in the years immediately following this harvest. Berry writes:

In 1973 James Baker Hall photographed, with acute discernment, these scenes and events of a Kentucky tobacco harvest. The place, the work, and the people are mirrored in these pictures as they were. We look at them now with a sort of wonder, and with some regret, realizing that while our work was going on, powerful forces were at play that would change the scene and make "history" of those lived days... (4)

For Berry, the Kentucky tobacco harvest is "history" viewed by the participants "with a sort of wonder, and with some regret" that "the place, the work, and the people" in the "scene" have changed. Berry's use of the phrase to "make 'history'" serves to disconnect tobacco farming of the past from that of the present, and to imply that the cultural practices in the photograph exist no more.

Actually, the work has scarcely changed. As for place, tobacco is still being raised on many farms in Berry's home county, Henry; according to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, Henry County ranks seventh out of 106 Kentucky counties in which tobacco is produced (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture: County Profile).<sup>165</sup> The people that make up such a scene, however, have largely changed—and here is the source of Berry's nostalgia: he mourns the end of the coming together of neighboring farmers to harvest a crop of tobacco. As I described in Chapter 2, migrant workers, primarily from Mexico and primarily undocumented, have become the principal source of labor during cutting and housing for most Kentucky farmers as they have for farmers across the country, currently accounting for at least 75% of total tobacco labor hours (Snell and Halich). Berry regrets the dependence on a “subordinated class of menial laborers working without either a proprietary interest in the crop or equity in the land” (3).

The incongruity in Berry's nostalgia, however, is that there had long been a reliance on hired labor at harvest time, and even in this time that Berry mourns the labor situation involved inequities based not only race but also gender and class. In many counties, there were African American men and women working in tobacco for wages or as tenant farmers, there were low-income widowed women (particularly during the fall tobacco stripping time rather than harvest), and people in the counties further to the East talk about the “boys from the mountains” who would come at harvest time—boys from the Appalachian region for whom the harvest was perhaps a rare opportunity to earn cash. And in every county there were sharecroppers, black and white (although sharecroppers

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<sup>165</sup> There are 120 counties in Kentucky, but tobacco is now raised in only 106 of them.

and tenant farmers cross class lines in the burley region, in part through the particulars of the now-defunct federal tobacco program).

In my analysis of the KDA News, I noted periodic references to hired help in tobacco, as well as labor shortages, in seeming contradiction to the widespread nostalgia that I encountered for a time in which tobacco work was all done by family labor. For instance, in 1954 there was a description of what was then a new chemical being tested, maleic hydrazide, which “in the very near future” “may eliminate hand suckering” of tobacco plants (Kentucky Agriculture Bulletin August 1954, 7). The KDA estimated that maleic hydrazide—today a universally used chemical known as “MH,” “sucker control,” or “sucker dope” that did indeed replace hand-suckering—would cost the farmer about \$15 per acre but would eliminate about \$30 per acre in labor costs. If saving labor costs, quantified in dollars, is a primary argument for the use of MH, rather than saving the farmer’s own time, then clearly the hiring of labor for suckering was common even though I have repeatedly been told that until the most recent decades labor was hired almost exclusively during cutting and housing time and sometimes during stripping.

Berry has carved out a particular time and place to mourn, characterizing the “historical moment” captured in the photographs as an “interlude” between periods in which tobacco’s symbolism had changed, and in which the people doing the work changed (1). This act of carving out a moment in tobacco history as representative recalls John Dorst’s reading of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, in which he argues that the Chadds Ford Historical Society places the “definitive past” of the region in the colonial period, and in doing so “reduces the synchronic richness of a past period, with all its complex social forces and relations, to an immediately comprehensible ensemble of a few

elements—a kind of tableau” (Dorst 130). According to Stuart Tannock, rhetorics of nostalgia always involve “a positing of discontinuity” between “then” and “now” (457). Berry has created a tableau in which the complex history of tobacco is simplified and reduced to one harvest; the harvest of “then” is discontinuous from those of “now.”

Not only has Berry simplified the labor situation of the early seventies, but in his tableau he glosses over the changing politics of tobacco occurring at this time with the statement that, looking back, “we” realize that “powerful forces were at play that would change the scene and make ‘history’ of those lived days...” (4), implying that he and the others in the photos were unaware that the changes going on around them would affect them. This could hardly have been the case since they had just experienced the release of the Surgeon General’s report on the dangers of smoking in 1964, the imposition of a warning label on cigarette packages beginning in 1965, the removal of cigarette advertising from the airways in 1971, and the continued rise of overseas production. Berry’s essay is a public form of nostalgia as described by Ray Cashman, “Nostalgia is a cultural practice that enables people to generate meaning in the present through selective visions of the past” (138).

As an “interlude,” this moment is constructed as discontinuous with tobacco harvests as they still take place, for while Berry mourns the pride with which the crop was treated, farmers continue to take pride in their tobacco crop. However, while some small farmers still touch every leaf of tobacco that they grow in processes identical to those in Hall and Berry’s *Elegy*, others don’t touch a single leaf, but instead supervise the work of a crew of laborers. Although there may have always been hired labor, the tobacco man and his family worked beside them. This has changed for many farmers,

resulting in a changed relationship with the crop. Berry's elegy is a public expression of a commonly felt nostalgia for a past "golden age" of tobacco production and lost relationship with the crop. The golden age that he mourns is one in which the tobacco man was the most respected man in the community; the relationship that is now lost was a physical one based on a tobacco man's pride in his crop.

Timothy Lloyd and Patrick Mullen describe such a "golden age," as perceived by retired Lake Erie Fisherman. In the golden age of commercial fishing described in the personal experience narratives of these men, the past was always a better place in which there was "more primitive technology, harder work, clearer water, more abundant fish, and less governmental restriction" (80). This is very similar to the nostalgia as expressed by Berry, for a time in which tobacco technology was more primitive, the work certainly harder as a result, and the tobacco was of higher quality.<sup>166</sup> According to Lloyd and Mullen, "The work was hard, but the men were up to it. This is a significant element in maintaining occupational identity after retirement: the retired fisherman can still see himself as a fisherman because from his perspective the ones fishing today are not fishermen in the same sense that he was" (88).

Similarly, Amy Shuman has described a "golden age" period for a community of artisans in Pietrasanta, Italy, in which "stories serve as nostalgic reminiscences that glorify a lost past and lament the present state of events" (Other Peoples' Stories 62). Such stories serve to construct and maintain a shared understanding of the period of these carvers' grandfathers as a golden age, before particular changes occurred. Like Berry,

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<sup>166</sup> Feelings about the role of government in tobacco are complex, since the tobacco program was so important for so long, and yet farmers have not wanted government involvement in terms of FDA regulation (now a reality), increased taxation, and anti-tobacco campaigns.

these artisans “are constructing this scenario of disappearance by determining what counts as continuation and deserves to be lamented in change” (64). The narratives they tell, according to Shuman, are allegorical stories of the past which comment on the present.

These two examples of narrative constructions of “golden ages” highlight the importance of “change” in the construction of an understanding of a period of a golden age. Berry’s choice of 1973 for his golden age, while determined in part by what he seems to take as the happenstance of Hall’s photographs having been made that year, is a period in time prior to particular changes in the context and production of tobacco. This is highlighted by his comment that “[t]he Henry County tobacco patch of 1973 was not remarkably different from that of, say, 1940” (1). Of course it was different, but he is equating it as similar in part because it immediately preceded the change that is most often cited as the biggest thing for tobacco, the move from hands to bales and because this was the end of the period in which local labor could be depended on and acreages were small enough that a group of family and neighbors could get much of the work done although, as I’ve said, many at the time also hired help. Berry and others mourn the loss of the time that the family once spent together; tobacco is often described as “the glue that held families together.”<sup>167</sup>

It was a time in which quality still mattered (by which Berry implies that it no longer does), and although the Surgeon General’s report had been issued, according to Berry, farmers were not yet feeling the impact of stigma. Berry states, “I no longer remember how these pictures came to be made” (18). Although, as I have described,

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<sup>167</sup> When women express nostalgia about tobacco production, it is most often about time spent together as a family, particularly in the stripping room.



photos of tobacco harvests in family albums are common, James Baker Hall's photos are different because he was a professional photographer rather than a family member or participant in the harvest. It is important that this is the same period I described in the previous chapter as the period in which tobacco as "a way of life" was becoming art, through the release of "heritage prints" and so forth. The fact that the pictures were made at this time further indicates a growing self-consciousness of tobacco as threatened heritage.

This suggests important connections between heritage and nostalgia, and distinctions that are not often articulated. I have classified Berry and Hall's *Elegy* as nostalgia rather than the production of heritage because it is presented overtly as a eulogy for something dead, gone, and mourned. When the pictures were taken, they may well have been intended to document threatened tobacco heritage. Thirty years later, however, the images can be described as a production of nostalgia instead, because of the perspective within which Berry frames them: one of total, painful, loss. According to Fred Davis, nostalgia "is a past imbued with special qualities, which, moreover, acquires its significance from the particular way we juxtapose it to certain features of our present lives" (13). Berry is indeed judging tobacco production today through his comparison with this 1973 harvest. Yet, what Berry is mourning is his own heritage, now stigmatized. His understanding of tobacco production as dead, based on his observations that the traditional ways of doing things are gone, is a theme in other public discourses about tobacco being "gone."

For these reasons, the period that Berry is eulogizing seems to be the most obvious period of time that would be treated as a "golden age." However, on those

occasions when I specifically asked my interviewees the question “what was the best time for tobacco?” I was most often told the 80s or 90s, suggesting either multiple golden ages (or in fact, no golden age) or that my use of the term “best time” had a meaning that is different from what might be understood as a “golden age.” In some ways, both are true. The 80s and 90s were the best times for farmers because tobacco was in demand which meant better prices and fewer grades (less work), baling tobacco meant faster work, and quota lease arrangements improved during the period. These were the “best times” when measured by economic prosperity, but they were not the times about which nostalgia is most often expressed.

During a 2008 interview with Martin Henson, he and I discussed the current push for farmers to move to large bales as compared to the circumstances of the move from hands to bales. He commented that “things [have] really changed” in regard to the great reduction in the amount of time it takes to strip tobacco as a result of the move to baling, and we then had this exchange:

Martin: But uh, oh we handled it a whole lot different, whole lot different. Everything had to be so-so.

Ann: And do you miss that?

Martin: No. *[laughing]* We in the good old days now. Just like several years ago I had a, old gentlemen that was uh, that helped me for years. And he was up about, eighty years old at the time, we was stripping tobacco. Harold [...] was, with us. And we got to talkin’ about the good ol’ days. Me and Harold was talkin’ ‘bout the good ol’ days. [The older gentleman,] after a while he got tired of hearing that he, he said “I wanna tell you boys,” he said “right now is the good ol’ days.” *[laughter]* We was talking about the horse- you know using the horses. ‘Course when I first started out, that’s what I used, I used horses to plow my ground with, cultivated with, and the whole works. Had a, had a tobacco setter, pulled it with a team o’ horses. That’s the way I started out.

Ann: But those weren't the good ol' days.

Martin: Those weren't the good ol' days. [*laughter*] Now's the good ol' days.

He's laughing here at his own nostalgia, knowing that he wouldn't anymore want to go back to tying hands then he would want to return to using a team of horses to plow and cultivate. But by laughing at it, he is acknowledging that he and other farmers do feel and express such nostalgia—even though things are better for them today.

Throughout my interviews and conversations, nostalgic stories and expressions of change arose that are comparable to Lloyd and Mullen and Shuman's examples of golden age narratives. The periods of time that were referenced were often not specific periods, and might or might not have been Berry's mid-1970s. Rather than a specific period of time, such nostalgia was most often expressed in relation to the tobacco era of the speaker's father (or possibly grandfather). Because these speakers are of varying ages, this suggests that the golden age of tobacco production is fluid and less about tobacco than about cultural practices that reinscribe a performed identity. This is in marked contrast to Shuman's description of the golden age for Italian stone carvers, which was much more specific: "a period of the early 1900s, when artisans worked in large studios employing hundreds of workers" (*Other People's Stories* 62). The golden age is always moving, and no one is ever "man enough"—which brings me back to the category *tobacco man*.

In Berry's description of the tobacco man, quoted above from his 1991 essay, he is mourning the passing of the *tobacco man*: "In those days, to be recognized as a 'tobacco man' was to be accorded an honor such as other cultures bestowed on the finest

hunters or warriors or poets” (54). This category symbolizes a gendered relationship with the crop, the performance of particular skills, knowledge of an aesthetic system, and a type of man who was highly respected in the community. Berry’s *Elegy* raises the question: If this relationship is gone, where does this leave today’s tobacco men?<sup>168</sup> During our interview county agent Dan Grigson described to me the lessons he learned from his father about doing a job the right way, particularly after he’d been given two-tenths of an acre of his own tobacco to raise. I asked if he would describe the farmers that he now works with daily in the same terms that he describes his father, and he replied:

Sure there are a lot of good tobacco farmers. There are folks who grow tobacco. There are folks who I call, “pretty good tobacco farmers.” And then there’s that, that upper level who just- they’re “tobacco men.” They’re- tobacco women or tobacco men. But they do the extra, they always seem to have a good crop, even in a dry year or, you know too wet of a year, they’ll still come out with a very good crop of tobacco. Detail people. People again who are good managers and make things work. They take care of getting the soil samples and making sure the fertility’s right. Selecting the best varieties, making sure pests are under control. Topping at the right time, cutting at the right time, and watching those doors and curing that crop down. And then, take a lot of pride in making sure that when they prepare it for market it’s prepared well. Not just all thrown together and, grades are not mixed up, no weed trash or anything like that in there. They uh, they truly have pride in doing a good job.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> When the book came out I asked a friend in Kentucky who had been photographing tobacco farming if she’d seen it and her reply was, “Yes, I have it and while I’m a Wendell Berry fan, the book made me angry! He sounds like no one after 1973 [...] cared a hoot about their crop! The growers I worked with were VERY proud of their work and tried VERY hard to do a great job” (email communication with the author 3/6/06).

<sup>169</sup> Grigson’s inclusion of the statement that “They’re- tobacco women or tobacco men” is part of a pattern of recovery that I witnessed in a number of interviews. I call them recoveries because they were consistently like Grigson’s in that while they were truly, I believe, an acknowledgement that there are some women who raise tobacco, such statements often followed instances in which the speaker had referred to farmers specifically as male and felt the need to correct himself. Once the recovery was made the speaker eventually returned to the use of male pronouns for the remainder of the interview. While I have no way of confirming it, I believe that my presence as a woman interviewing primarily men about a male-dominated arena made them aware of gender in ways that they may not normally be, and therefore led to their desire to make such recoveries in their usage of gender-specific language.

Through his articulation of the difference between *tobacco men*, “pretty good tobacco farmers,” and men who simply continue to raise tobacco, Grigson is describing prevalent ideas about the changed relationship with the crop. A tobacco man is someone who knows the proper cultural practices required to raise a good crop and carries them out consistently because he or she has “pride”; it’s the addition of “pride,” consistently used as a descriptor in such contexts, that I believe moves the description from practice to performance. He is describing the performance of the category tobacco man, while juxtaposing it with “pretty good tobacco farmers” and “folks who grow tobacco” implying that these are altogether different categories today. I experienced many different forms of articulation of this change, all pointing to a divide between growers that are seen as *tobacco men* and those that are described as *businessmen*. These are understood as separate categories, each with different practices associated with them. The golden age of tobacco production is always a time before tobacco was treated as a “business.” Now that some farmers treat it as a business, the implication is that not only have the practices changed, but now not all tobacco farmers perform the category *tobacco man*. Although the golden age is always pre-business, each generation of men has his own golden age of tobacco men that he compares himself to; it is never him.<sup>170</sup>

Particular farmers that I worked with were clearly admired by other farmers because of their continued performance of traditional practices; there’s a distinction between those who are now seen as tobacco men and those who aren’t, and this

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<sup>170</sup> Ramírez-Ferrero identifies this as something American farmers are undergoing more generally, “Indeed, American agriculture is being transformed from a ‘way of life’ with a focus on family-owned and operated farms into a business” through the restructuring of agriculture that is taking place (10). He notes that it is younger farmers who are most often described as “much more business-like,” and as not caring for their land as well (116). This is again comparable with both tobacco and Lloyd and Mullen’s fishermen.

distinction is based on the relationship with the crop and how it is raised, as Grigson describes. The *tobacco men* I got to know continue to do much of the work themselves, beside those they hire; they are farmers to whom others come for advice, and often smaller farmers who are seen as continuing to take pride in quality over quantity. But not only were such farmers regarded as no longer “typical,” opinions seem to be that their days are numbered. Ramírez-Ferrero suggests that in his study of Oklahoma farms, smaller, “family-focused” farmers were “considered noble yet naïve and anachronistic”; such farmers, he argues, “were being increasingly marginalized as industrial discourses gained prominence in the region” (119). Small tobacco farmers, too, seem to be regarded as “noble but naïve,” and I was often told that farmers now face a choice based on the economy of scale: they can either raise many acres and get paid less per pound because of poorer quality or stay small, do the work themselves, and get paid more per pound for a smaller amount. Generally speaking, as I will discuss, this is the distinction between today’s *tobacco men* and *businessmen*. There is a widespread consensus that the days of the small tobacco farmer are numbered.<sup>171</sup>

I was stripping tobacco with a twenty-year-old tobacco farmer one day, and he asked me if I had a title for my “book”—as he and others usually referred to my dissertation—yet. I told him I did not yet have a title, and asked what he would call it if he were me. After some prodding, he finally said, “Oh I don’t know, ‘The Last of the Dying Breed’”? In response to this suggestion, I asked him, “So do you think you are a dying breed?” at which point he suggested “Hope for the Future” instead. In thinking about this later, I came to understand this exchange as telling of the power of public

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<sup>171</sup> Comments were often made that fewer larger growers would be easier for the tobacco companies to deal with, but that they won’t get the same quality if that’s who they are left with.

discourses, that this young farmer who up to this point had expressed nothing but confidence about the future of tobacco (and his intention to increase his family's already large tobacco acreage, to maybe even double it some day) would label tobacco farmers as a "dying breed." But this did not fully explain how he could see them as a dying breed if he—a twenty-year-old tobacco farmer—was one. I have since realized that he sees it this way because he sees himself in a different category as the "breed" of tobacco farmers that have come before him. In Yearning for Yesterday, Fred Davis notes with complete certainty that "the past which is the object of nostalgia must in some fashion be a personally experienced past rather than one drawn solely, for example, from chronicles, almanacs, history books, memorial tablets, or, for that matter, legend" (8). However, this young man, like other tobacco farmers, is nostalgic for a mythical golden age and the mythical men that lived in it, rather than a personally experienced past (much like Shuman's stone carvers, perhaps). He meant that "tobacco men" are a dying breed; he was expressing his awareness of and nostalgia for tobacco men of the past. He never experienced this past, but he has met the men and heard stories of that past.

I asked another county agent, one who worked in tobacco as a young man, if there was still the same pride in the crop as there was in the past:

Ann: How about the pride- You talked earlier, you've mentioned several times the pride in, your crop and, I mean is that still, there?

K. Bishop: No. Well. I mean obviously everybody wants, a good crop- but, they're just worried about, getting the pounds and having the color that the company wants or the qual- the texture that the company wants. You know they're not- they don't, they don't care about the weeds in it as long as there's not so many weeds that they can't, get the cutters through. You know they don't, care about stepping on the tips and bruising the plants, they care about, stalks splitting out and falling off because that's, that's a whole stalk that doesn't make it to the

barn. But, not you know the leaves. So I don't, I don't. The pride's not there like it used to be, they- there's obviously varying degrees of, there's those still do take a lot of pride in how things look and, how how well they manage the crop then there's all the way to those that, you know they don't care, as long as they get, a paycheck- And you know those, that extreme are the guys that, you know that, throw trash in the middle of the bale and cover it up with tobacco and, hose the tobacco down with water so it weighs a lot before it goes to the warehouse and stuff like that.

He is largely making the same categorical divisions that Grigson did; those who do not raise tobacco in the present mourn the way it was once raised and shake their heads at the way it is now raised. According to retired tobacco farmer Jerry Bond, "For people that raise it now, it's all about production and money. You know they put out large acreages, they don't care if it gets wet [...] And they just don't produce the product [...] like I was taught to do" (9/15/05). Retired farmers, like Lloyd and Mullen's retired fishermen, view themselves as having done things in a different, better, way. Such judgments of current practices are, out of necessity, differently expressed by those who still raise tobacco.

Ray Cashman describes the use of nostalgia in a Northern Ireland community as a critique of the changes that have taken place over the years, and argues that in this community nostalgia is a way of coping with accelerated technological change. Although here too nostalgia can be understood as a means of coping with change, recent technological changes and innovations are also celebrated. The following took place during a 2007 interview with Martin Henson, for instance:

Martin: This technology's great! [*laughing*] It is

Ann: Sounds like it



Martin: It it uh, Things has come a long ways, come a long ways. I've often wondered, uh...my what my daddy would say if he seen me balin' tobacco [laughing]

Ann: What would he say?

Martin: I don't know [laughing] He prob'ly's turned over, several times, and you know just

Ann: Why?

Martin: Well, I know, for years he raised tobacco, he raised tobacco till he he was 84 when he passed away he raised tobacco for prob'ly 70 some years 75 years, hand tied it, everything was neat, just, prim and proper. Now you just throw it in there and tramp her down and go on [laughing].

This exchange followed Martin's description of the move from plant beds to float beds, the second most commonly cited technological innovation in recent tobacco production history. The move to bales is often described as *the* biggest change that has occurred in tobacco production; the parallel between the two changes is emphasized by Martin's shift from one topic to the next, connecting them with his exclamation that "This technology's great!" He then immediately, however, shifts to his father's perspective, a common occurrence when innovations such as baled tobacco are mentioned; speakers often followed positive comments about innovations with a coda similar in meaning to Martin's statement—what would my daddy or granddaddy say if they could see us now? The answer is always an implied negative. Martin is describing the current treatment of tobacco in similar ways to Grigson and Bishop, but his judgment on the treatment of tobacco is couched in what his father would think, not what he thinks, although certainly the two perspectives come together.<sup>172</sup> Fathers serve as yardsticks of change because

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<sup>172</sup> Yet, many farmers are resistant to the large bales that are currently being pushed by manufacturers, because they do not see the economic benefits. Many of their reasons for resistance are comparable with

fathers' performances of *tobacco man* are the available models, leading men to judge themselves by their father's standards or from their perception of their fathers' perspective.

In a 2008 interview, Martin and I returned to this topic. Martin again commented on the disapproval his father would feel for baling tobacco and went on to describe the work that was involved in his father's day, including stripping tobacco into five to seven grades (instead of three) which all had to be "neat."

Yeah he was real particular. But uh, back there then, he raised three four acres, something like that. But he didn't hire any help. You know there was me and, and uh, he might hire one person, and uh course two or three dollars a day. But uh then the tobacco was just bringing, forty and sixty cents. But it, it had to be done a certain way.

Here he makes the distinction between his experience and his father's; although his father was "real particular"—a phrase used over and over, with a meaning comparable to "pride," to describe fathers and grandfathers—he only raised three or four acres to Martin's fifteen. He didn't hire labor much, important because hired labor is often blamed for today's tobacco not being of the same quality as it once was. The judgments of those who no longer raise tobacco (extension agents and retired farmers) are similar to the perception of what fathers would say; farmers themselves must take the changed economic circumstances of raising tobacco into account as they judge themselves.

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arguments made against small bales in the late 1970s. Farmers often say that older farmers resisted baling it or would not have liked it if they'd seen it- but the speaker always welcomed bales; I have to wonder (at least in some cases) how time has shaped their memories of their own willingness to bale tobacco. So while past innovations may be embraced, present and future changes may not be. The same is true for mechanical harvesters; in the same breath farmers often embrace and reject the possibility that they would ever use a mechanical cutter.

The combination of increasing economies of scale, hired labor, and technological innovations combine to drastically change the practices of tobacco farmers, so that their activities largely fall outside of the category of tobacco man. This is why immediately following his exclamation that “This technology’s great!” Martin calls up his father, and what his father would say about technological change; this is also why he points out that his father didn’t hire labor (although he then corrects himself and says he might hire one man). For those who still raise tobacco, labor-saving technologies and access to a source of labor have become increasingly necessary as economies of scale continue to increase. Yet, as these farmers compare themselves to their fathers, they see themselves as lazy and point out that today it is a whole lot easier to raise tobacco. Clarence Gallagher told me, “We’re lazier. Uh I, raise more tobacco than my dad did, but the man worked harder. He worked harder. He worked harder than I ever worked, as far as raisin’ tobacco. He sprayed it all by hand, I’ve got a highboy. I can spray in one morning what it would take him, two days to spray.”

The disapproval with which older generations look at the younger generations, comparing how much harder they worked, how many less possessions they have, etc., is quite commonly expressed in multiple contexts. Lloyd and Mullen note that commercial fisherman “spoke of how hard the work was in the old days compared to today” (86). This is certainly the case in tobacco communities—the story earlier in this chapter told by one farmer when we saw a young man trying to butt a gate closed with his bumper is one such example—but just as frequently, the men of younger generations are the ones making the comparisons, judging their lives as easier and themselves as lazier. The

following point made by county agent Mike Carter is representative of comments I often heard about fathers:

I wouldn't say [my father was the] "most progressive" farmer but if you showed him, if he saw, others doing something and it proved to be...I never thought that he put much stock in it being "easier," more easily accomplished, but it- if it was [*laugh*] something that was maybe quicker, or accomplished the same purpose with, maybe less expense, uh, he was willing to adapt. (6/6/07)

Importantly, Carter makes a distinction between something being "easier" versus quicker or less expensive, in the context of previous generations. Farmers (fathers) did not change because something was "easier"; the word "easier" cannot be used about a previous generation of tobacco men because these men "worked harder." Yet, whether farmers described their fathers as early or late adopters of technology, they always stressed that they were willing to change if they could see that it would work. Part of the tobacco man performance is adaptability; however, as I will discuss in the next chapter, this adaptability is limited to particular kinds of change.

Younger farmers (meaning farmers below 50 or 60) do see their jobs as easier than their fathers' in part because of the move away from physical labor; some noted this in the context of tradition, with references to what they do as no longer "traditional." At one time it would have been fairly easy to describe a "typical" tobacco farmer and the work he and his family engaged in, as I did early in this chapter. There is now much less typicality. While most farmers remain physically involved in working ground, setting part or all of their tobacco, and cultivating it, they may or may not top, cut, house, or strip any of it. The aspects of the work that today's tobacco farmers are most involved in are those that can be done from the tractor or truck (suggesting perhaps that the relationship

between masculinity and machinery may eventually change), while the work they are least involved in are those activities that involve physical contact with the plant.

My first experience stripping tobacco was in a non-conventional stripping room on a large tobacco farm. I recognized the differences between this and more traditional tobacco stripping arrangements, and talked with the farmers about it. But because this was my first time stripping tobacco, one detail did not stand out to me as non-conventional: in this stripping room everyone wore light-weight cotton gloves while they stripped the tobacco. The young farmer I was accompanying loaned me a pair of gloves for the fairly short time I stripped tobacco with him and the others. Later that day, I bought a pair of similar gloves in order to be ready for my next stripping room experience, but when I mentioned that I had bought the gloves to a friend who had grown up raising tobacco, she expressed surprise that anyone would wear gloves to strip tobacco. She told me that her daddy would not have allowed it.

I never wore my new gloves. As I visited other stripping rooms, and stripped tobacco myself in some of them, I watched for gloves. The few instances in which I saw gloves being worn were stripping rooms in which Hispanic workers were doing all the stripping, with little or no participation by the farmer/operator. When farmers still did some or all of their own stripping—and these were the instances in which I stripped tobacco, with farmers—gloves were not worn, except perhaps when piles of tobacco were being brought in or stalks brought out. If anyone was wearing them it was the hired labor, not the farmer/owners.

I've since realized that the gloves are as important symbolically as they are tangibly. Gloves protect the wearer from the sticky residue of the cured tobacco and keep

hands warm in stripping rooms which are unevenly heated. Tobacco men don't need protection from the crop or the cold. Gloves also block the wearer from full access to the plant, inhibit natural movement, and lead to rougher treatment of the leaves; gloves lessen the ability to handle the crop gently (with respect). Gloves not only provide a literal and symbolic separation from the crop and therefore tangible evidence of the changed relationship with the crop, they also symbolize the move to tobacco production as "business," as it is primarily hired hands that are protected by gloves.<sup>173</sup>

In an interview for the Kentucky Oral History Commission in 2001, Christian County tobacco farmer Bruce Cline compared his operation with a neighboring farm, a father and son who raised only ten or twelve acres, and "do *every* bit of it themselves." He described these farmers as "Very content. [...] prob'ly as happy a lot of people as I know of anywhere [...] you know and the wives help them strip the tobacco and [...] it's very much a family, oriented business. My farm on the other hand, is a is a is a much different beast. It is you know it it is more as *Wal-Mart* so to speak ..."

Mark Roberts told me:

[F]or lack of a better word, I wanna say it's not fun anymore? And I know work is not supposed to be really fun anyway? But it used to be, years ago, family, friends would work together, everybody would jump in and, you would help each other out. It was kinda fun to go to the field and work. Now pretty much, people that raise very much tobacco at all, it's nothing but a business. That's all it is. And it has nothing to do with enjoyment of the crop. It's hard labor, it's k- it's all management, there's no time, the farmer that actually owns the land, that's raising a big crop, doesn't have time to get out there and do the labor anymore.

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<sup>173</sup> Extension agents mentioned to me more than once that when doing farm budgets, it is hard to get farmers to quantify and include their own labor as an expense. This points to a particular way of understanding one's own labor versus paying others to do the work. Paying others to do work aligns with "business."

When Mark says it is a business and “that’s all it is,” he implies that it was once something more. The changed relationship with the crop is often described in such terms; “it’s nothing but a business now” is a summarizing phrase of all the changes that have taken place as tobacco acreages have grown and dependence on hired labor has increased. Cline and Roberts both imply that a “family oriented” farm is a happier farm than a farm large enough to be comparable to Wal-Mart. In his discussion of the changes on North Carolina tobacco farms resulting from the end of the tobacco program and the introduction of contract production, Peter Benson echoes Cline’s sentiment that farmers work in a new environment in which they have fewer opportunities for taking pride in their work, “Local cultural values of independence and pride are challenged as farmers are reclassified as service providers who are part of corporate teams” (358). Like “pride,” “business” serves to describe the cultural practices of tobacco farmers; unlike “pride,” however, it can be used as either a negative judgment or an acceptance of new practices, depending on the speaker.

“Businesses” and “family farms” are presented discursively as separate categories that imply different relationships with the crop. For some, “business” is a dirty word that reflects the speaker’s nostalgia for a time when tobacco farms were “family farms,” not “businesses.” At times, this perspective seems to ignore the fact that tobacco farming was always about earning an income. This sentiment was evident in the perspective of the county agent quoted above who said in part that “they’re just worried about, getting the pounds and having the color that the company wants.” Farmers were always worried about that; but, like Roberts, he’s arguing that that is not *all* that they were worried about. Tobacco has intertwined values, economic and symbolic. The tobacco man pride that is

associated with “family” farms is threatened, as for most farmers the ability to touch every leaf and therefore produce a crop to be proud of is gone.

For others, however, “business” is not a dirty word. One extension tobacco specialist pointed out to me at a workshop for “innovative tobacco growers” that those farmers in attendance now treated their operations “more like a business.” Burley Co-op President Roger Quarles explained to me that tobacco has always been, for him, about “economic well-being” and that if something more profitable came along he would get out of tobacco. He then went on to say:

Roger Quarles: I think that today’s tobacco farmers, the ones that’s left in this industry are probably gonna take exactly that approach. And it’s gonna be an absolute business to ‘em.

Ann: And is that different from, tobacco farmers of the past?

Roger Quarles: It prob’ly is a bit uh. You know we had that huge group of people there that, that would almost tell you they, they do it because they love it? And I’m not gonna argue whether they did or not. (1/31/08)

Quarles, too, sees a changed context for today’s farmers, but as the president of the Burley Co-op he accepts this change, and through his dismissal of it, acknowledges the nostalgia that others might feel.

Despite different judgments about tobacco farming as “business,” there are agreed upon perceptions of what separates it as a business from earlier contexts of raising it. The dramatically increased amount of tobacco grown by individual farmers and the resulting changed relationship with the crop distinguishes the categories of “tobacco men” and “business men.” Clarence Gallagher described the difference between large and small tobacco farmers:



And I seen that when I worked at the warehouse, when I seen somebody that, that come in had uh a hundred and fifty thousand pound o' tobacco, I mean it looked like it'd been pitched on there with a pitch fork. The bales was just every which a way you know what I mean just half tied and, weighed a hundred and fifty pounds, and a man would come in, and he said "well, I got five thousand" and it would- almost just be like a- out of a book. I mean his tobacco would be just every leaf was just in place and just, everything was nice and neat.

Importantly, Clarence raises just over fifty thousand pounds, so while he is a large grower based on the standards of the past, he is between the two groups that he is describing here. Of course size really matters because it determines how much attention you can pay to the crop and how it looks; size determines a farmer's ability to perform *pride*. The difference comes back to the aesthetic expression of pride resulting from a physical relationship with the crop and the work.

Younger, larger farmers—those who might best be described as, and describe themselves as, businessmen—would probably not describe themselves as “nostalgic.” Yet, they frequently commented on the ways that tobacco production just wasn't done like it used to be, and therefore that the tobacco was just better in past days. In addition to a lost relationship with the crop, men's nostalgia is for homosocial contexts in which masculinity was once performed. Instead of cutting tobacco a row over from a buddy, many of these farmers spend a large portion of their day driving alone in their pickups and tractors, overseeing the work of other men—men they perceive as different from themselves based on language, culture, and connections to the crop and the land. While tobacco farmers may still spend much of their time in homosocial environments, a great deal of the time they are interacting with men they view as outsiders and over whom they

exercise power—and who they compensate with cash rather than “swapping work”—rather than with peers.

Instead of a tobacco auction and the performances for one another described earlier, the sale of tobacco is now accomplished by appointment at a “receiving station”; the audience for the performance of the tobacco farmer is now primarily tobacco company buyers rather than other farmers, as the short time spent at the receiving station has resulted in much less time for interaction among farmers. Instead of hours or even days spent at the warehouse with other farmers, for the most part they merely pull up, drop off their load of tobacco, get their check, and resume work. The short wait means fewer farmers at the receiving station at a time, limiting both interactions and the exhibition of the crop for one another. One man told me that if he has a long wait at the receiving station he spends that time on his cell phone, catching up on work-related calls. “Today, marketing is a private affair,” notes Peter Benson. He goes on to describe his experience accompanying a farmer to a receiving station in the flue-cured region of eastern North Carolina:

After pulling the truck to the side of the driveway he does a once over—perhaps tucks leaves loosened on the highway back into bales, ducks underneath the flatbed to ensure there are no fluid leaks, tucks his workshirt into his khaki pants, and, in the truck’s side-view mirror, makes sure none of the ham biscuit he ate on the way is caught between his cigarette-stained teeth. “Everything has to be perfect,” Fred says. (364)

Although Benson's experience seems to have been of hyper-performance for Philip Morris as compared to my own experience at such a receiving station, I too witnessed such changes.<sup>174</sup>

Not only was there more pride in it when their fathers did it, according to tobacco farmers, but there was also more respect for the occupation; there is clearly a connection between the changed relationship with the crop and tobacco farming as a stigmatized practice. The crop itself, each leaf, was once respected; tobacco men didn't treat it poorly, didn't step on it or throw it in the baling box. Ultimately this was of course for economic reasons; it was the individual leaves that paid for the farm, bought the children's shoes and so on. But through traditionalized ideals of masculinity, respect for the crop was commensurable with respect for the man who grew the crop. Because the crop is no longer respected—by the public, by farmers—neither is the tobacco farmer. That's why change in quality matters: the disassembly of the confluence of pride in tobacco and respectability as a man in the community.

The following quote, included in my chapter on stigma as well, makes the connection between the treatment of the crop and the changed status of the tobacco grower quite explicit. Jerry Bond told me this during a narrative stage interview at the Kentucky Folklife Festival in 2005:

There was a time, there was a time when tobacco farmers were proud. And they were proud of their product, and they were proud of their work, and they were- a lot of little towns were built on tobacco farmers—money that tobacco made. But that pride doesn't exist any more. Tobacco farmers really have become second class citizens—a lot of people—and even today I noticed down there today [*at the*

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<sup>174</sup> Phone conversations I had with two Kentucky farmers in April 2009, about the coming season and changes in Philip Morris' contracts suggest, however, that Kentucky receiving stations may soon mirror those of North Carolina.

*tobacco farming tent*]. People come through and one woman said- I prob'ly shouldn't say this on the air- but she said, [*nasally voice*] "Well I guess they're gonna show us how to smoke it too" you know. And I thought "No, ma'am, That's not what we're about. We're only talkin' about the tradition of tobacco, and the impact it's had on Kentucky. I don't smoke and I don't encourage you to smoke. You know if you want to that's your choice." But you know she was all up—she was all up in the air, over the fact that there was tobacco being displayed here at this festival. But we- It's just not a prideful thing anymore. You're almost like a drug dealer. [*slight laugh*] (9/15/05)

According to Jerry, "it's just not a prideful thing anymore": farmers can no longer be proud of a crop that is associated with shame.

Frequently, I was told that tobacco production is now about quantity rather than quality. Interestingly, this was being said at least as far back as 1947. In the May issue of the KDA news that year, there was discussion of farm practices that had led to increased yields of burley, and a comment that strong prices have encouraged a concentration on volume over quality. Martin told me in 2008, "And, you know years ago, it was all about uh quality, and now then it's quantity." This is one clue that if there is a "golden age" period in tobacco production, it has long been a moving one, with each generation looking back at an earlier period as a better period.

Ray Cashman describes the men in his study in terms of "a sense of loss coupled with a perceived acceleration of change over the past century that is considered unprecedented and destabilizing" (146). While I encountered something similar to this, active tobacco farmers more frequently expressed something close to a sense of marvel, such as Martin's "This technology's great!" Tobacco farmers regularly talk about how things have changed but they certainly do not want things to be the way they were, at least in terms of the work involved in raising a crop in the current economic structure.

Rather, as Stuart Tannock comments: “The ‘positively evaluated’ past is approached as a source for something now perceived to be missing” (as quoted in Cashman 138).

Today’s tobacco men don’t want to return to the difficulties of the past, but they do want the respect that was once accorded to their fathers. In an ongoing process of loss and gain, they express something like a trade-off: the loss of the symbolic values of the past for economic value in the present. They embrace the changes and new technologies because of the changed economic contexts in which they raise tobacco, even as they feel less like the tobacco men that their fathers were. As I will discuss in the next chapter, however, “change” is understood differently when it means changing to another crop. The “diversified farmer” requires an abandonment of the traditionalized model of masculinity of the tobacco man.

## CHAPTER 7: “Replacing” Tobacco: Rhetorics of Transition and Diversification

“And I don’t want to grow tobacco.”

“You don’t? Why not?”

“Oh I’m being stupid, I guess. Farm economics, what do I know? But half the world’s starving, Jewel, we’re sitting on some of the richest dirt on this planet, and I’m going to grow *drugs* instead of food? I feel like a hypocrite. I nagged Cole to quit smoking every day of our marriage.”

“Well honey, you didn’t ask the whole world to quit smoking. And by the way, they didn’t.”

“I know. It’s the only reliable crop around here you can earn enough from to live off a five-acre bottom, in a county that’s ninety-five percent too steep to plow. I *know* why every soul in this end of three states grows tobacco. Knowing full well the bottom’s going to drop out any day now.”

“They’re trapped.”

“They’re trapped.”

Barbara Kingsolver (Prodigal Summer 122)

In her novel Prodigal Summer, Kentucky author Barbara Kingsolver tells the stories of three women, including Lusa, a “city” girl who marries a tobacco farmer and moves to his family farm. Shortly after their marriage, Lusa’s husband dies; declining tobacco income has forced him into an off-farm job delivering feed for the farm supply store, and he dies in a truck accident. This leaves Lusa with his farm—and surrounded by his extended tobacco farming family—and decisions to make about the future. Through her knowledge and connections outside the region, she successfully raises a herd of meat goats in the place of a crop of tobacco, to the total bewilderment of her deceased husband’s family and the surrounding community. In this novel, Kingsolver provides a

fictionalized account of many of the issues surrounding the current period of transition in tobacco-producing regions, and demonstrates that the story is a gendered one; in this case a story in which a woman morally opposed to tobacco transforms a tobacco farm into a successful new venture. Kingsolver presents what many see as the future of Kentucky agriculture, movement away from tobacco through the development of niche product markets—a particular kind of “diversification.”

In this chapter, I will first consider competing discourses of “transition” and “diversification” as they relate to current discussions, public and more private, about the future of agriculture in Kentucky.<sup>175</sup> I will examine the rhetorics that underlie these discourses: the implicit arguments contained in different usages and definitions of the terms “diversification” and “transition.” Further underlying these discourses, are differences in the valuing of the concept of tradition and concepts often deployed as its binary opposite, such as general ideas of change as well as more specific concepts such as, in this case, diversification as well as innovation and entrepreneurialism. In doing so, I will distinguish between dominant and alternate discourses about the future of tobacco production. The dominant perspective on the future of Kentucky agriculture, as I will describe, is that tobacco production is in its last days and that the “transition” period currently taking place is one in which tobacco farmers have, will, or should be replacing tobacco production in favor of “diversified” agriculture, involving assumptions that simply planting another crop or raising alternative livestock will lead to the replacement—economically as well as symbolically—of tobacco. This perspective values the farmer who is understood as willing to break with tradition and experiment

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<sup>175</sup> I extend my appreciation to Robert Pearce, Tobacco Specialist with the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, for reading a draft of this chapter.

with niche and value-added products, restructuring his or her operation around vegetable production, aquaculture, vineyards, salsa production, agritourism activities, or other such alternative endeavors. I will first briefly describe the competing discourses, and then I will begin by examining both print and electronic publications authored by state-supported agricultural agencies and the news media as rhetorical sites that not only demonstrate the dominant perspective, but, particularly in the case of state agencies, are examples of the policy implications of the valuing of one rhetorical discourse over another. I will argue that there is a desire on the part of the state to put a new face on Kentucky agriculture, as a result of the stigmatization of what was once the primary cash crop.

I will then consider the usage of these terms by farmers and others I interviewed during the course of my fieldwork, in order to demonstrate where discourses gathered in the field align with and diverge from the dominant discourses. Many of those who are choosing to continue to raise tobacco do so based on a belief that there will always be a market for Kentucky burley (or at least that they will raise it until there is not); for them “transition” refers to the end of the federal tobacco program and the negotiation of new relationships with tobacco companies through direct contracting. But many also see themselves as already “diverse” farmers, because they have traditionally depended not just on tobacco but also on cattle and hay and often other farm products. While the dominant view judges these farmers as resistant to change, they argue that they have adopted many technological innovations over the years when innovations proved economically beneficial.



Next I will describe, as a case study, an exemplar model of the “diversified” Kentucky farm, and I will contrast this model with the “traditional” Kentucky farmer in part to demonstrate the challenges that tobacco farmers face if they choose to follow the model of diversification. Such challenges include the need for new knowledge, equipment, farm structures, and land as well as the need to exchange a previously performed identity (the “tobacco man” described in the previous chapter) for a new one. The comparison will highlight the difficulties of “replacing” tobacco. In addition, however, I will argue that the contrast of “diversified” and “traditional,” while seeming to reinforce the tradition/change binary, in fact points to a more complex understanding of the interactions between tradition and change. Gender is central to this discussion, and in this chapter I will consider both women’s roles in the transition to other crops, and the category “diversified farmer” as distinct from the category “tobacco man” as I described it in the previous chapter. Although both tradition and innovation are central to both tobacco farming and forms of farming that fit the dominant definition of “diversified,” tobacco farming is discursively aligned with tradition, and “diversified” farming with innovation; innovation is valued over tradition.

### **Competing Rhetorics about the Future of Tobacco**

The reduction in rates of smoking due to an increased awareness of the health effects of tobacco use is one of several circumstances that have contributed to a decline in the demand for American-grown tobacco. Other factors include cigarette manufacturing techniques that require less tobacco, such as “puffing” the dried leaf and a process in which the plant stems that were once discarded are reconstituted into sheets and cut and

blended with the leaf (Axton 126), and increased production in other parts of the world. U.S. tobacco production was in decline long before the tobacco buyout, as the number of tobacco farms of all types and in all regions of the country fell from 512,000 in 1954 to 56,977 in 2002, with a 39% decline in the number of tobacco farms between 1997 and 2002 (Capehart “Trends” 3).<sup>176</sup> Between 2002 to 2007, covering the immediate post-buyout period, the number of tobacco farms nationwide dropped from 56,977 to 16,234 (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture: United States). However, the numbers of pounds that were raised during the same period dropped only from about 873 million to 778 million, demonstrating the difficulty of comparing the number of “tobacco farms” since, until the buyout, individual growers were often responsible for the tobacco on multiple farms.

Kentucky tobacco production dropped over 30% the year following the buyout (Snell “Outlook”); despite the record-low levels of tobacco production in 2005, Kentucky farmers continue to raise far more burley and dark tobaccos than any other state, and only North Carolina outranks Kentucky in total tobacco production (USDA, Kentucky Agricultural Statistics). Half of all farms in the United States on which tobacco is grown are located in Kentucky, and “the number of farms growing tobacco outnumber all other single ag[riculture] enterprises in Kentucky with the exception of the number of cattle/hay farms” (Snell “Census”).

The 2007 Census of Agriculture, released in February 2009, revealed that many had underestimated the number of remaining tobacco farms. University of Kentucky

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<sup>176</sup> The statistical decline in the number of tobacco farms is somewhat misleading, since “tobacco farm” is defined by the USDA as a farm with at least half of its receipts from the sale of tobacco. As allotments were cut tobacco income dipped and income from other sources rose.

agricultural economist Will Snell had estimated that there were about 6000 tobacco farms in the state in 2007 at an average size of fifteen acres (Snell “Burley and Dark Tobaccos”); the census revealed that there were over 8100 tobacco farms. According to Snell, “amazingly, the largest single group of farms was those in the 2 to 4.9 acre range, accounting for 1/3 of all Kentucky farms” (Snell “Census”). Snell’s underestimation of the number of farms is directly tied to his estimation of farm size; he assumed that farm sizes had grown more than they have, and that therefore the amount of tobacco being produced was spread out over fewer farms. Despite public discourses hinted at in the previous chapter, that Kentucky tobacco is “industrializing” and that tobacco is now grown primarily on large farms, there were only 72 farms in the state on which over 100 acres of tobacco was grown in 2007 and only three on which there was over 250 acres. Only 10% of Kentucky tobacco farms produced over 25 acres of tobacco (Snell “Census”). This is even more startling when compared with North Carolina, which had just over 2600 tobacco farms in 2007, and the largest category was in the over 100 acre range (583 farms) (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture: North Carolina 28).<sup>177</sup>

According to a review of James Baker Hall and Wendell Berry’s Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy (discussed in Chapter 6) in the Lexington Herald-Leader, subtitled “Harvesting our Heritage”: “tobacco growing is going, done in first by health concerns, then by the global economy and cheap imported leaf” (Mead). The federal tobacco buyout was seen by many as the final blow—to many a welcome blow—to what had long been Kentucky’s largest cash crop. Headlines proclaimed, “Farmers at the end of tobacco road – Many don’t trust contract system,” (Warren) and “Kentucky turns the

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<sup>177</sup> As I briefly touched on in Chapter 2, flue-cured tobacco is grown in larger acreages today because production has been mechanized in ways that burley has not.

page on tobacco.” According to one news report, “Kentucky’s farmers should enjoy near-record income in 2005, but that prospect doesn’t erase fears about the new federal tobacco buyout program and whether it will cause many burley growers to quit because they can’t make a profit anymore” (Jester).

Other headlines suggest tobacco is being replaced: “Burley is just a memory now: Bourbon [County] farmers turn their full attention to crops for Farmers Market” (Fortune), and “‘Goodbye’ tobacco, ‘hello’ cukes and corn” (Brown). I was having lunch by myself at a restaurant in the capitol city of Frankfort one day in January 2008, and I overheard a conversation between two men at a nearby table about the growing number of wineries in Kentucky. One of the men explained to the other that hardly any tobacco is grown in Kentucky anymore because the “subsidies” are gone and therefore it is no longer profitable; he went on to tell his dining companion that because of the hillside land, little else can be grown, and wineries are an increasingly popular alternative. This conversation represents the prevailing wisdom about the current status of Kentucky tobacco: tobacco is gone and tobacco farmers are all moving away to such alternatives. According to the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, there are 113 grape producers and 46 wineries in the state (“Grape and Wine Program”). While these numbers certainly represent important farm ventures, they do not yet compare with over 8100 tobacco farms.

There are currently competing rhetorics about the future of agriculture in Kentucky; one is clearly represented by these headlines and the conversation I overheard—such discourses argue that the decline in tobacco production means that tobacco is *going*, that it is almost gone, and that it is being replaced by vegetable

production and other alternatives to tobacco such as vegetables, wineries, and agritourism. The other is what I hear from tobacco farmers, exemplified in the following exchange from an interview I conducted with Clarence Gallagher, who raised twenty-two acres of tobacco in 2007:

Gallagher: Even though they've had, you've seen all that negative in the paper and everything like this, *tobacco has went up in price* since the [year after the] buyout.

Ann: So it's not going anywhere?

Gallagher: Not...Like I said, I don't think you'll prob'ly ever see tobacco go completely out unless they put a ban on- [unless] you just ain't allowed to smoke in America.  
(*emphasis his*)

Here as Gallagher expresses his confidence in the sustainability of tobacco as a cash crop, he also demonstrates his recognition of a media discourse that does not adequately reflect his experiences and observations. Much like the heritage discourses discussed in a previous chapter, conflicting messages are expressed in institutional (state supported, political, media) and vernacular (tobacco farmers and their advocates) rhetorics of diversification and transition. And yet, it's not easy to break these discourses into two distinct categories. The first category of discourses I will describe are "institutional" in that they are supported by government agencies and are often found in the media; these discourses deploy the *dominant* rhetoric of transition and diversification. "Vernacular" voices (of farmers, farm organizations and advocates, etc.) are much more varied, dependent on the position of the speaker, and so I will instead discuss vernacular voices in terms of those that are institutionally supported (*dominant*) versus those that are not

(*alternate*). By *dominant*, I mean both that such discourses are commonly held by the general public, and that there is institutional power behind them.

Much like the vernacular heritage discourses I previously discussed, alternate discourses of diversification and transition often talk back to dominant discourses, in this case questioning implicit assumptions about the entire notion of “replacement.” Néstor García Canclini reminds us that “all production of meaning is anchored in material structure” (10); the economic and the symbolic are intricately entwined. According to Canclini, “we must not overlook their reciprocal dependence, or else the meaning that proceeds from the totality of which they are part will be lost” (12). Herein lies a central issue in understanding the current situation for Kentucky tobacco farmers: the economic and symbolic values of tobacco have been discursively separated. Institutional heritage discourses, as I discussed in Chapter 5, value the symbolic at the expense of the economic, as they push tobacco into the past and erase the present economic importance of the crop to many farmers. Others, including the Agricultural Extension Service, argue that tobacco is economically irreplaceable. Agricultural economist Will Snell told me, “Well. You know, the classic argument is ‘just raise something else.’ And you know that’s easy to say but, it all comes down to economics and then just, other crops are not as profitable.” While certainly true, this perspective fails to account for the symbolic value of the crop.<sup>178</sup> While, as Snell points out, the dominant discourses assume that “transition” should be as simple as moving to new crops, alternative discourses argue that there is nothing simple about such a move because it involves both economic and symbolic realignments. In order to understand both the current situation for Kentucky

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<sup>178</sup> By this I do not mean to argue that Snell himself fails to recognize the symbolic value of tobacco, but his statement is representative of a broader perspective that fails to do so.

tobacco farmers and to ensure that their voices are heard in decisions about the future, the economic and the symbolic must be examined in tandem. Vernacular discourses point out the problems in dominant assumptions that tobacco can simply be replaced. Like the vernacular heritage discourses, they argue “we’re still here,” and “tobacco *still* pays my bills.”

*Twin rhetorics of “Transition” and “Diversification”*

Kentucky’s current governor, Steve Beshear, noted in his 2008 State of the Commonwealth address, “We are blessed with a sound agriculture community that is also focusing ahead rather than behind. Though its size may have diminished somewhat, the end product has been remarkable.” While seemingly a simple comment on a bright agricultural future, the governor’s statement can also be read as a rhetorical move to emphasize that Kentucky’s days as a tobacco state are behind it. As the following examples make clear, Kentucky state government publications and state agency websites argue that Kentucky has changed from tobacco dependency to diversified agriculture, through what I am calling twin rhetorics of transition and diversification.

In my analysis of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter in a previous chapter, I described the shift from an emphasis on tobacco to the rhetoric of diversification, and here I will consider representative examples of this shift in the newsletter and beyond (and in some cases I will reference examples mentioned in Chapter 3). The front page of an October 1990 KDA newsletter featured a photo of two men loading sticks of cut tobacco onto a wagon. The caption reads:

Fall Scene – Kentucky Style. Tobacco harvesting has moved into curing and stripping seasons. Tobacco markets open November 19. Pounds this year are expected to be 17 percent above last year's crop and the quality appears to be good.

This image, together with the caption, frames tobacco production squarely in the present. Here, the end of the tobacco harvest and the commencement of curing and stripping are represented as self-evident aspects of what “fall” means in Kentucky.

A look at the Department of Agriculture newsletter from its beginnings in 1944 through the present provides an informative barometer of the changing status of tobacco over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. In the 1940s and early 50s, tobacco farming was presented in these newsletters as an accepted and crucial core of the Kentucky farm economy, even though it was in the 1950s that health concerns began to be substantiated in well-publicized reports. Following World War II, cigarette smoking was on the rise, and the increasing demand for tobacco was treated as unquestionably positive in the pages of the newsletter, as it meant increased income for Kentucky farmers. For instance, in March of 1944 the Commissioner of Agriculture encouraged farmers to keep up with the growing demand for burley because of “[i]ncreased home consumption, plus shipments overseas to our soldiers and allied countries” (1).

By the 1960s, attitudes toward tobacco were beginning to change, but during this time, the newsletters present a picture of great pride in tobacco, with stories about tobacco contests at the state fair, numerous tobacco princess and queen pageants, and events and articles celebrating the history of the crop. The February 1961 issue features a



photograph of Kentucky's float in the Kennedy inaugural parade, accompanied by this caption:

Tobacco, Kentucky's most important crop, was combined with some of the State's other fine traditions to carry out a theme of "Peace" for the Commonwealth's float in the Kennedy Inaugural Parade in Washington, January 20. The float displayed a giant peace pipe and some burley tobacco, naturally, to smoke in it. In addition, the float was replete with lovely girls, a Kentucky Colonel and his lady and a replica of My Old Kentucky Home. The horses, of course, represented Kentucky's thorobred (*sic*) industry. The float was carpeted with a facsimile of our Blue Grass... (4)

In the 1970s and early 80s, the KDA was increasingly outspoken about the threats posed to Kentucky by "anti-tobacco" forces and the need for political support for the federal tobacco program and for Kentucky's tobacco farmers more generally. Government officials from governors on down expressed their support for the tobacco economy in the pages of the newsletters. By the late 1990s, mention of tobacco had come to center almost entirely on the uncertainties of tobacco's future and the future of the federal tobacco program. By the time the tobacco buyout took place in 2004, tobacco had disappeared so fully from the pages of the newsletter that the buyout was not even reported on.

The photos on the covers of five recent October issues of the newsletter present a picture that is altogether different from the "fall scene" presented in October 1990, with images of children on horseback (2003), a farm safety demonstration (2004), the Commissioner of Agriculture introducing the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture (2005), a "corn maze" (2006), and a sorghum producer (2007). Not a single article or photo in these five issues is focused on tobacco. An article in the October 2007 issue is quite

specific about the meaning of fall in Kentucky, with a headline proclaiming: “Fall means family fun on Kentucky farms” (5). The article goes on to list harvest festivals and agritourism destinations where the public can enjoy such attractions as “a corn maze, horseback riding, inflatable amusements, hay rides, a pumpkin patch and a playground.” Despite the fact that fall continues to mean the end of the annual tobacco harvest, tobacco has disappeared from the October newsletter of the KDA, implying an erasure from Kentucky’s “fall scene.”

The assumption that tobacco is part of the past but not the present eliminates the need for an obligatory nod to this self-evident scene of life in Kentucky. With the acceptance that tobacco is on its way out, the focus shifts to diverse “alternatives”; the shift to alternatives then serves to further validate the erasure of tobacco through its omission from agriculture publications such as the KDA newsletter.<sup>179</sup> KDA, through its status as the primary state institution charged with promoting Kentucky’s agricultural interests, assumes the authority to define the way in which multiple audiences—including members of farming and non-farming rhetorical communities—should view Kentucky agriculture. As an audience, the agricultural community is perceived to be looking to the KDA for identification (although, as I argued in Chapter 3, farmers are much more apt to look to farm organizations and the Cooperative Extension service than to KDA). By *identification*, I mean Burke’s term for the “ways in which the members of a group promote social cohesion by acting rhetorically upon themselves and one another” (Burke

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<sup>179</sup> I do not intend to imply here that other crops, including experimental crops, were not an ongoing item of news in the KDA newsletter. They were very much present from the beginning of the newsletter. What has changed is the emphasis on these crops as an alternative to tobacco income that is lost. The importance of tobacco income is in fact reinforced through articles about experimental crops as early as the 1940s in which tobacco income was the yardstick by which farm profits were measured. Occasional stories were printed about a farmer who grew another crop, and the lead would be how it compared to his tobacco income.

A Rhetoric of Motives xiv). Images promoted by KDA endeavor to persuade the agricultural audience to identify with this picture of what agriculture looks like in Kentucky. In the case of the October issues, the images argue that Kentucky agriculture is no longer based on tobacco as the number one cash crop, but is instead based on “diversified” farming activities, such as agritourism (represented by the corn maze and other fall farm activities) and niche products (including traditional products such as sorghum). Because tobacco symbolism has so drastically changed—from icon to stigmatized crop, as I have argued—KDA clearly also has an interest in changing the image of Kentucky agriculture for their non-farming audience, both within and outside of Kentucky. For members of this audience, KDA presents an image of agriculture that fits within the larger agricultural discourses taking place at the national level, discourses to which I will return.

The website of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture further supports an image of a changed Kentucky farming landscape, most obviously through photographs chosen to represent Kentucky agriculture included in a banner that is embedded in all of the main pages of the website. The photos in this banner are consistent with the KDA newsletter and include, from left to right, a photo of the Commissioner of Agriculture, a barn, cattle, a horse, vegetables, a small child holding a pig, and a field of corn. Importantly, upon close inspection the barn appears to be a tobacco barn. Traditional Kentucky burley tobacco barns are lined with shutters in order to allow for the control of moisture levels and air circulation inside the barn as the tobacco cures. The barn in the photo appears to have an open shutter, indicating to those familiar with the traditional barn style (most Kentuckians) that this is a tobacco barn. There is, however, no tobacco peeking out of

the opening, which might be understood to mean that it is not curing season *or* that the barn is no longer needed for housing tobacco because there is no tobacco left to house.<sup>180</sup>

It is interesting to compare this banner with the masthead of the newsletter. The masthead changed a number of times over the years, but from 1952 through 1969 it included drawings of farming symbols, including a horse, a shock of hay, an ear of corn, a cow, and at the center: a disproportionately large tobacco leaf.

The images framing the KDA website suggest a link to a major marketing program of the KDA, “Kentucky Proud,” a program that promotes the consumption of locally produced foods. This campaign is part of the larger “locavore” movement that has flourished nationally in recent years, encouraging the consumption of local foods, preferably organic foods, as a means of both addressing environmental concerns and supporting American family farms. Bumper sticker slogans such as “Farmers feed the world,” and “Know your food. Hug your local farmer” generally represent the rhetoric of this movement, a movement that follows on efforts to save family farms that began during the 1980s farm crisis (most notably through Farm Aid, the organization begun by Willie Nelson and other celebrities) but also has roots in earlier American agricultural movements.<sup>181</sup>

The “Kentucky Proud” campaign represents Kentucky’s attempt to join the movement to encourage the consumption of local products. Of course, it is difficult to see how the farmer who continues to raise tobacco—who may be struggling with

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<sup>180</sup> This reading also calls up related public discourses about what to do with empty tobacco barns, discourses I’ve heard and seen both in Kentucky and national media. Meanwhile, tobacco farmers that I have spoken to often must use alternative curing structures due to a lack of barn space because the barns are not where they need them.

<sup>181</sup> Such roots include the Southern Agrarians, early- and mid-twentieth century “back to the land” movements, and the writings of more contemporary agrarian writers such as Wendell Berry.

financial insecurity and difficulties holding on to his or her land like the farmer who raises food—fits into this discourse.<sup>182</sup> Therefore, in order for Kentucky to insert itself into this larger movement to promote the valuing of family farming, the image of tobacco as central to Kentucky farming must be replaced with images of food crops.

A November 2007 report on the PBS news program NOW featured an effort by one Virginia organization, Appalachian Sustainable Development, to do just that—to “persuade farmers to change from growing tobacco to growing organic fruits and vegetables” (Brancaccio).<sup>183</sup> This program stressed the difficulties involved in “confront[ing] centuries of tobacco tradition” and “convincing tobacco farmers to break with what used to be tried and true,” echoing the dominant rhetoric of diversification by putting tobacco farmers in a position of direct opposition to the “eat local” movement. If these stubborn farmers, so dependent on tradition, are not willing to make the change to organic vegetables, this rhetoric implies, then they will be left behind.<sup>184</sup>

This is the message of the KDA’s marketing program, Kentucky Proud. Although many if not most states increasingly promote similar programs, Kentucky Proud serves purposes that are more complex than such programs in non-tobacco states. Kentucky Proud supports the erasure of tobacco farming through its use of the dominant rhetoric of diversification as it speaks to multiple audiences. Most obviously, the campaign encourages all Kentuckians to buy locally. In addition, like the KDA publications described above, it asks Kentucky farmers to identify with it by transitioning away from

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<sup>182</sup> However, cigarette brands such as “Kentucky’s Best,” made with (but not exclusively) Kentucky tobacco do attempt to join this movement.

<sup>183</sup> My thanks to Dorry Noyes for alerting me to this program when it aired.

<sup>184</sup> When I mention my research to people from outside Kentucky in conversation I receive responses that fall into several categories. One is second hand versions of narratives in which tobacco farmers are becoming organic vegetable farmers, most likely from news stories such as this one.

tobacco and diversifying their operations by raising alternative, *healthy* crops. Finally, it presents an image of Kentucky agriculture as having wholesome and nutritious foods at its base, erasing the stigma of tobacco from Kentucky's national image. Tobacco has been moved from the KDA site, symbolizing the present, to the Kentucky Agriculture Heritage Center (discussed in Chapter 5), where it serves as a symbol of Kentucky's past.

The KDA is not the only state agency that actively and visibly deploys the twin rhetorics of transition and diversification. States have made a range of decisions about the allocation of funds resulting from the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement. Kentucky, with Governor Paul Patton at the helm, chose to put 50% of these funds into agriculture development, and the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy (GOAP) became the administrative body of the Kentucky Agriculture Development Board, the entity that oversees the dispersal of the funds. The rhetoric of the GOAP is perhaps even more important to consider, because it has a direct impact on funding available to farmers interested in expanding their operations.

The following text appears on the GOAP website, on a page entitled "Planning for the Future," with a banner that features a photograph of thoroughbred horses:

Changes are taking place for tobacco producers because of the changing practices of the big cigarette companies, social and economic pressures from the markets, regulatory agencies and the health industry. Kentucky farm families, political leadership, agricultural organizations, and many others confront the question of *how to best make the adjustment away from tobacco production in a way that allows farmers to capture the value of their assets, while adjusting to a sustainable, alternative asset base*. Many producers are leading the way by having already made a successful effort to *replace lost tobacco income*. How can Kentucky help farmers build on the models of our agricultural leaders, maximize the value of their assets, and *explore new opportunities* in production and marketing of agricultural products? (*emphases mine*)

I quote from this text at length here because it clearly demonstrates the discourse of transition that has become dominant. This text is consistent with other materials that the GOAP makes available to the public, such as press releases announcing the dispersal of funds. My emphases point out a rhetoric of transition that argues that tobacco should and will be the crop of the past and that Kentucky farmers must now “adjust” by “replacing” this traditional crop with “sustainable, alternative” “new opportunities.” The argument that many farmers have successfully “replac[ed] lost tobacco income” assumes that there are no symbolic losses to consider in addition to economic losses.

Through images embedded in the design of the website, GOAP reinforces this dominant rhetoric of transition and ushers in the related rhetoric of “diversification.” Each page of the site has a banner with a different photographic image, presumably signifying Kentucky agriculture, including the executive director with the Governor and a horse, fields of lettuce and wheat, horses, hay, cattle, corn, flowers, grapes, and a goat. Tobacco does appear on one page, hanging in field curing structures; this is the page that briefly describes the Phase II monies farmers received from the settlement, the dispersal of which ended in 2005 with the buyout (“Phase II”).<sup>185</sup> Tobacco is pictured as part of the past and not the future of Kentucky agricultural as supported by the GOAP; a visual argument is being made that tobacco farmers need not apply for funding.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Interestingly, many of these images appear to have changed after the Beshear administration came into office in 2008. The images in October of 2007 included mushrooms, horses, apples, cows, and a bed of flowers. There was no tobacco at all.

<sup>186</sup> However, the field curing structures that are pictured on the Phase II page appear to be the type of structure used with the largest of the mechanical harvesters currently being tested. In this sense the one image of tobacco does suggest the future, and that future is one of very large farms since a tobacco farmer would have to raise hundreds of acres in order to support the expense of a harvester. Ironically, Agricultural Development Board funds cannot be used toward the purchase of any type of tobacco harvester.

In fact, the support of projects related to tobacco farming, such as the building of tobacco barns, through Agricultural Development funds has been an ongoing controversy. The “investment philosophy” of the Agricultural Development Board is as follows:

The Board will invest these funds in innovative proposals that increase net farm income and effect (*sic*) tobacco farmers, tobacco-impacted communities and agriculture across the state by stimulating markets for Kentucky agricultural products, finding new ways to add value to Kentucky agricultural products, and exploring new opportunities for Kentucky farms. (“Agricultural Development Board.”)

This has come to mean that the Board will not give grants to projects that are directly linked to tobacco production, but it will fund projects that support the efforts of tobacco farmers in other parts of their operations, such as livestock (buying bulls, building fences, etc.) and alternative agriculture projects.<sup>187</sup> One 2005 editorial in the Lexington Herald-Leader began: “Kentucky officials should put an old anti-drug slogan to good use and ‘just say no’ to tobacco growers” (“Wrong Fertilizer”). This commentary employs the language of anti-tobacco rhetoric as it concludes, “Overcoming the economic addiction to tobacco is an essential step in overcoming the physical addiction and medical horrors that tobacco wreaks on Kentucky... Putting tobacco settlement money into tobacco-growing would be wrong.” A similar argument was put forward in the same paper a year later, “Few have begrudged agriculture the lion’s share of the settlement, because Kentucky

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<sup>187</sup> The Agricultural Development Board funds are divided into three types: 1) grant funds that are distributed at the county level through model projects developed by councils set up for this purpose in each county; 2) grant funds distributed for non-model projects through a state-wide application process; and 3) loans distributed through the Kentucky Agricultural Finance Corporation (KAFC). KAFC funds, unlike the two categories of grant funds, have been used for loans to build tobacco barns through the Agricultural Infrastructure Loan Program, and this is a primary source of the controversy.



can never overcome its physical addiction as long it's economically addicted to tobacco. That rationale falls apart when settlement money goes to tobacco" ("Don't backslide"). These editorials link the rhetorics of transition and diversification by arguing that support for agriculture should be restricted to non-tobacco farm projects in order to move Kentucky away from its "addiction" to tobacco farming. They also confirm that opinions on the future of Kentucky agriculture are based not only on perceptions of how farmers can best assure themselves of a profitable future, but on moral questions about tobacco production and the associated stigma.

A 2005 news article reports that both the state legislature and the Agriculture Development Board (the governor-appointed board that makes decisions about what projects to fund) were divided on this issue (Green), and members of the tobacco production community whom I interviewed confirmed that the contention around this issue began immediately following the settlement. According to Ben Crain, former warehousemen and head of the Burley Auction Warehouse Association until its recent closure, "His argument, the governor's argument was, that... Those funds, could not- *could not* be used, for tobacco production"(3/2/08). Crain summed up the effectiveness of the program in this way: "To upgrade uh cattle production, they let you, buy a... herd bull that was performance tested and all that, and all that did was double the price of a herd bull." The director of the Council on Burley Tobacco also described the ongoing controversy and told me:

And uh there's been a lot of people that felt like it was for diversification only, um and there's m- and there's people that believe that then there was people that felt like well it was money that's put out there to help keep farmers on the farm. And and of course our contention has been if if you think it puts money out there

that will help a farmer stay on the farm, why not spend it there too? But I understand where the others come from, and the health groups and everybody it's a big big issue, you know not wanting to spend anything supporting tobacco. (Wallace)

Although the majority opinion, including Wallace's, seems to be that the Board has been successful overall, opinions differ on the place of tobacco in the board's funded projects; opinions are obviously dependent on one's perspective on the future of tobacco production. It is clear that regardless of the good things that have come out of the Board, there is resentment as well, particularly from those who hope for and see a future for tobacco. It seems clear to me that the resentment is based on the assumption under which the board works, that tobacco is going and therefore the goal should be to encourage farmers to replace tobacco production through "diversification"; tobacco's changed status is also at stake. In March 2009, the Board approved a number of policy changes, including loosening the eligibility requirements as they relate to a farmer's status as a tobacco farmer. Tobacco farmers were formerly to be given priority; the recommended policy changes define a "tobacco dependent" farmer and note that "lack of tobacco dependency shall not render a producer ineligible for program participation" ("Board Policies").

Since I began observing and collecting evidence of the dominant rhetorics of diversification and transition, I have noted interesting exceptions, including: a July 2006 headline in The Kentucky Post that read "State Exceeds Expected Tobacco Acreage" (Associated Press); a September 2007 article in the Wall Street Journal about the growth of tobacco production outside of traditional regions, now that the quota system is gone

(Etter); an October 2008 front-page article in The [Frankfort] State Journal entitled “Still Profitable: Tobacco farmer continues family tradition” (featuring Roger Perkins, who participated in my fieldwork) (Henderson); an Associated Press story in November 2008 which proclaimed “Rising from ashes, tobacco rebounds” (Schreiner and Dalesio); and, finally, a story in the KDA publication Marketing Matters called “Tobacco Tried and Still True” about Western Kentucky growers (Holleran). While such articles do serve as an acknowledgement that tobacco is in fact not gone, the tone of each of the articles is one of surprise and suspicion, suggesting that each sees itself as presenting a unique story, discontinuous from the other, similar stories and from ongoing tobacco production. Tobacco is newsworthy now because it is surprising, not because it is a self-evident or even a self-conscious aspect of Kentucky agriculture. The co-existence of contrasting headlines—such as “Burley is just a memory now” and “Still Profitable: Tobacco farmer continues family tradition”—confirms what I’ve been told many times: this is still a transition period for tobacco. It is the meaning of “transition” that is at issue.

Statistics of course tell us something as well. In 2006, vegetable production represented \$20,250,000 in farm receipts compared with \$319,655,000 of tobacco income (USDA Kentucky Agricultural Statistics and Annual Report 2006-2007). While the 2007 Census included over 8100 tobacco farmers, in 2007 approximately 2000 farmers participated in community farmers markets across the state, and over 350 producers sold their produce at auctions (Powers). The KDA announced at the end of 2008 that Kentucky Proud is now “1,300-plus strong” (“Kentucky Proud”). Such statistics certainly demonstrate that there continue to be more tobacco farmers than vegetable

farmers; but of course they tell us little about the symbolic value or the future of tobacco production.

*Alternate rhetorics of diversification and transition*

The result of the rhetorics of transition and diversification (combined with institutional heritage discourses described earlier) is a process of devaluation followed by the erasure of tobacco farming, and more importantly the tobacco farmer, from both the discursive and physical landscape. Such rhetorics ignore both the economic and the symbolic values of tobacco production through the suggestion that tobacco can simply be replaced. Meanwhile, tobacco farmers like Clarence Gallagher, quoted above, argue that tobacco is here to stay. According to Marlon Waits, who, along with his brother and other male family members raised over forty acres of tobacco in 2007, “We’re gonna try to stay in it as, as long as we can make a living at it.” Extension agent Mike Carter told me (as quoted in Chapter 4),

A lot of growers will tell you that it is a legal crop. It is a potentially profitable crop. “There are companies that want to buy it, and are willing to pay me a fair price for it. As long as it’s legal, and I can make money doing it, I’m gonna continue to grow it.” (8/23/07)

In this example of one of the rhetorics of defense discussed in a previous chapter, an example that echoes what I heard from many farmers, Carter is not only defending past production, he and the farmers he invokes are attempting to compete with tobacco as not only increasingly contested, but also with public discourses that argue that tobacco is increasingly unprofitable and on its way out.

Tobacco companies offered growers incentives for increased production in their 2007 contracts, including an additional nine cents per pound if growers made the terms of their contracts, multi-year contracts in which growers committed to increase production each year in return for an increased poundage price, and cost-share programs for the investment in tobacco-related equipment and curing structures. Such incentives seemed to be neither the actions of an industry that saw the supply meeting its demand, nor of an industry that believed that burley tobacco of the quality that they require can be raised elsewhere, despite lower prices offshore.<sup>188</sup> Because of its flavor and burning qualities, burley is a key ingredient in top quality American blend cigarettes. As Dean Wallace of the Council on Burley Tobacco put it during our interview, “I think Philip Morris’ Marlboro model, is an unbelievable brand, it’s one of the most valuable brands worldwide that’s ever been created. And so I think they’re gonna be very reluctant to make changes in the mix of that tobacco.”

The climate of Kentucky is believed, by farmers, agricultural professionals, and seemingly by tobacco companies, to be uniquely ideal for curing burley tobacco. While it may be possible to grow burley elsewhere, I am told, it can not be cured—the key to burley quality—anywhere like it can in Central Kentucky. Robert Pearce, Tobacco Specialist with the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, expressed to me doubts about there being much room for growth in the Kentucky burley market. However, he noted that Kentucky burley will continue to be a “status symbol”:

The “status” meaning that you know, the perception is that this is the best burley tobacco in the world, and so, the status comes from being able to afford the best. And why is ours the best in the world? Well, you know this is where burley

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<sup>188</sup> Things have, however, changed since 2007, and the contracts offered by Philip Morris in 2009 raised fears of a dwindling market. I describe this briefly in the Conclusion.

tobacco came from. We set the bar I mean [...] this is where it came from and everybody else has been trying to duplicate what's here. So there is a certain amount of truth to the fact that you know it can't be duplicated elsewhere in the world...

Burley's value as a "status symbol" suggests additional layers of value, locally and globally. Pearce cautioned, however:

Now, over the last two decades or so, the amount of imported tobacco going into cigarettes here is increasing. As our prices went up, I mean manufacturers have figured out ways around the inferior quality of some tobaccos and can still produce a product that's acceptable to their end consumer. So, we're not irreplaceable. They may not be able to duplicate what we've got but we're not irreplaceable.

The 2007 incentives and cost-share programs indicate that there was less Kentucky burley being raised than the companies needed in order to produce their products. According to Will Snell, the post-buyout drop in prices for American-grown tobacco had in fact resulted in an increase in the usage of U.S. burley by American cigarette companies, and the outlook for exports of U.S. burley in 2008 "remain[ed] relatively strong" (Snell, Powers, and Halich 4). In 2008 it was believed that, "[t]ight burley supplies and emerging opportunities in the dark tobacco sector will once again likely result in tobacco companies asking Kentucky tobacco farmers to plant additional burley and dark acres in 2008" (Powers 1-2). According to Will Snell and others, what was holding farmers back from producing more tobacco in 2008 was an unstable source of labor.

For farmers who have chosen to continue to raise tobacco, "transition" has a very different meaning than the one offered in the dominant rhetoric of transition I have

described, in which tobacco is a thing of the past and must be replaced. According to Mike Carter,

You know “transition” for many many people, as far as the tobacco buyout and what do we do after that and so on and so forth, is um, they’ve chosen to grow tobacco as a, on a more free enterprise basis, without the regulations and the price supports and all those kinds of things. So they’ve transitioned from growing tobacco under a federal program into growing tobacco on the open market.  
(8/23/07)

Dan Grigson described a similar meaning for “transition,” and added,

But for a lot of folks, they went through a fearful time, you know, “What am I gonna do?” “Are they gonna continue to pay me this, or does this look good and they’re gonna pay me for two or three years and that’s the end of it.” So, a lot of older folks especially, got very nervous, very scared about [what] their future was. As long as they had that quota they knew they had a little something to bring in some income. So that’s been the transition for those folks.

An information sheet produced jointly by the colleges of agriculture of the University of Kentucky, North Carolina State University, and the University of Tennessee describes the buyout as “one of the most dramatic changes in any U.S. agricultural policy over the last half century, as tobacco now has the distinction of being the only government-supported commodity to move abruptly to an entirely free-market policy” (Tiller). Rather than a “transition” to other crops, for farmers who choose to continue tobacco production *transition* means a changing context for raising a crop that they know well, a transition to an environment of uncertainty in which there are no “production controls and no safety nets” for the first time in over seventy years (Snell “The Buyout” 1). It also appears to be an ongoing transition period in which growers, without the federal government as intermediary, are increasingly under the thumb of

tobacco companies. Ultimately, it appears that the leading buyer of burley tobacco, Philip Morris, will determine the outcome of this transition.

“Diverse” has alternate meanings for tobacco farmers as well. Tobacco farmers have in fact always been “diverse,” as they are usually also cattle farmers and farmers of hay, feed corn, forages, and other crops.<sup>189</sup> Martin Henson learned from his father “not to put all his eggs in one basket,” (K. Henson) and this proverbial idea seems to be central to the farming philosophies of Kentucky family farmers generally. With the exception of the far western portion of the state, Kentucky’s fertile but hilly geography has made diversity a necessity. “You have the rolling land, it’s not suited for row crops, you’re not gonna grow many corn and soybeans on a lot of the land that we have, especially in Central Kentucky and on [into] East Kentucky” (D. Grigson). Kentucky farms are much smaller than farms in other parts of the country, and Kentucky farmers have traditionally utilized hillsides for livestock and maximized their flat land for their tobacco, feed corn, and forages.

Dominant rhetorics of diversification do not recognize this traditional form of diverse farming, however. Instead, as “diverse” shifted discursively to an active process that implies change, *diversification*, the meaning appears to have changed. I asked a Bourbon County farmer and farm policy activist what she meant when she used the term “diversification,” a term she used frequently throughout our interview, and she said:

Well it’s more than just having cattle, or just having cattle and tobacco, or just having cattle, tobacco and hay. I mean all those things- you’re diversified in having different activities going on on your farm. I think some of the *newer* ones were- well like aquaculture and, um, but *stepping out*. When you diversify, I

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<sup>189</sup> In fact, it appears that the majority of farmers that have stopped raising tobacco have increased these other traditional farm activities rather than move to new farming enterprises.



think more or less you're *creating* markets, you're *finding new ways to farm*.  
(Harkins *emphases mine*)

She acknowledges the multiple definitions of “diverse” and chooses as her definition the version that echoes the dominant rhetoric of diversification: “finding new ways to farm.”<sup>190</sup>

In response to my questions about recent efforts to promote diversification, Burley Co-op President Roger Quarles assured me that farmers were always involved in multiple activities on the farm:

I guess [those who promote diversification] assumed that people were just sitting around on buckets not doing anything, the time they weren't working in tobacco. Uh for some reason, and I don't know of any farmer that, fit that mold. Everyone I ever knew, was already doing other things other than tobacco when they had time to do that. Uh they weren't sittin' around- um uh, on the creek bank fishing.  
(5/20/08)

The valuing of innovation through diversification is of course not new. In the first decade of the twentieth century Clarence Poe, editor of Progressive Farmer magazine, pushed for agricultural diversification. According to Lu Ann Jones, “Men like Poe envisioned a modern South unfettered by tradition and open to change. Diversified agriculture would be an important part of its economic base” (17). As John Fraser Hart and Ennis L. Chestang noted in their 1996 article, “Turmoil in Tobaccoland,” tobacco farmers realized the value of diversification as early as 1960 as tobacco was under “increasing economic and political attack” (553). At this time, however, “diversification” in the flue-cured region of North Carolina studied by Hart and Chestang meant large-

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<sup>190</sup> It is important to note that she is defining her own experiences as a farmer who has led the way in Kentucky in the introduction of organic farming (including tobacco), aquaculture, and other alternative crops.

scale soybean production, vertically integrated poultry operations, contract hog production, and a renaissance of cotton production. As documented in the KDA News, and as I found through my interviews, Kentucky farmers, too, tried similar alternatives at this time (with the exception of cotton).

Quarles commented to me that there were always farmers trying new things; it is the expectations that have changed.

...I'd say prob'ly there was larger expectations, of diversity, by people that didn't realize how difficult the situation would be to, to go those routes, and I think when you look at the limited success, of all the things that's been tried I think that prob'ly bears that out. (5/20/08)

Here, Quarles alludes to the difficulties involved in diversifying a farm operation. I have repeatedly been told narratives of the failures of new crops, usually crops grown on contract.

Often, when I asked an extension agent or a farmer if they knew anyone who had tried something “new,” I was told a story about someone who tried bell peppers, Jerusalem artichokes, watermelons, even exotic animals such as ostriches—only to see the experiment end in failure. Former tobacco farmer Phil Sharp responded to my question about whether farmers in his county were trying other things to replace tobacco with this humorous narrative about a farmer that tried to raise cucumbers: He “...said he was pickin’ cucumbers, said there was a little one down there the size- right size to pick, and he raised up and lit a cigarette, reached back down there to get it and it done got too big.” Like other narrators, Sharp points out here that vegetable crops involve tremendously different marketing circumstances; in the case of cucumbers and other

vegetables, buyers want a very specific product, and there is only a short window in which to provide it. Such stories comment on the impossibility of “replacing” tobacco, and in fact I frequently heard this overtly expressed in comments such as “nothing can replace tobacco.”

According to one agricultural professional, “Everybody’s got their green pepper story. ‘I tried those green peppers and, you know I ended up with a truck load of *mush*, you know’” (Armstrong-Cummins). As she points out, peppers are in fact the quintessential failed crop in these narratives. Former tobacco farmer Judy Miller had a similar experience: “We uh, raised peppers, for a couple of years under contract, and the problem we had with that is whatever you had, if you had green ones they wanted red ones, if you had red ones they wanted green ones.” Clarence Gallagher told me the story of his experience raising peppers for three or four years in order to supplement his tobacco and cattle income.

I mean you had a contract with ‘em. But, they would tell you when they needed ‘em. And when we first started raising ‘em well they needed ‘em. You know it wasn’t no problem I mean they was sending you cards all the time [...] “these *two* weeks, we’ll be takin’” like uh green peppers. And then it wouldn’t be long you’d get a card that, “we’ll be wanting the red peppers.” And then “we want a chocolate pepper.” [...] You could take a pickup load, or two pickup loads or half a pick up load, pretty much get rid of ‘em. And uh, then on the end, wadn’t no cards comin’. You know “what’s goin’ on?” Here I’ve got peppers out here you know needs to be picked [...] And I said that’s it with me. You know I mean I’m not gonna raise these things and then take a harrow out here and harrow ‘em up. And that’s the reason I quit raising peppers.

Dan Grigson told me about a farmer who lost everything:

I won’t mention a name but I know a producer in [another] County that invested a tremendous amount of money, into horticulture production. He doesn’t have any

money left today. ‘Cause he had one bad year. He had a situation where he had disease and he had dry weather, he had nothing to sell. Almost nothing to sell. So, he’s no longer in the farming business today. So it is a huge huge gamble. These traditional enterprises that we have again, you pretty well know you’re gonna be pretty safe.

In contrast to dominant rhetorics of diversification, these narratives value traditional farming pursuits; in Grigson’s story tradition is explicitly valued. These stories also provide a contradiction to the widely held assumption that tobacco farmers, as a class, should be and are seeking alternatives. These narratives stress the impossibility of replacing tobacco, at both the economic and symbolic levels; they critique dominant assumptions that tobacco farmers should simply plant peppers or cucumbers, and their problems will be solved. They might also be read as warnings to farmers considering “alternative” crops and indirectly express fears about direct contracting with tobacco companies, a point to which I will return.<sup>191</sup>

This comparison also makes it clear that, in contrast to these narratives, the dominant rhetoric of diversification values “newness” and “creativity” over tradition. To be “diverse” within the rhetoric of diversification, a farmer must move beyond traditional ways of farming, must be progressive and innovative—even risky. As value is placed on the innovative farmer, the traditional farmer is devalued. According to Wendell Berry,

For some people, some Kentucky newspaper editors among them, the new infamy of tobacco [after the Surgeon General’s report] legitimized the old prejudice against farmers and country people. The growers were condemned along with the crop, even though the farms that produced tobacco had always been diversified and were contributing significantly to the food supply. (Hall and Berry 17)

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<sup>191</sup> Barbara Kingsolver’s inclusion of such a narrative told by a tobacco farmer, about another farmer’s attempt to raise tomatoes (“he ended up feeding thirty-five hundred pound of tomatoes to his hogs”), suggests that these narratives are not new (107).

Here, Berry relates the diversification discourses to the newly stigmatized category of “tobacco farmer,” as well as the older and more generalized stigma that farmers and rural people face. This devaluation of farmers also demonstrates the recategorization of tobacco farming as “heritage” and the related labeling of the tobacco farmer as a relic of a past time, as I discussed in Chapter 5. This, in turn, affects the creation and implementation of policy—such as the moneys from the tobacco settlement not being made available for tobacco-related projects even as the demand for tobacco continues. Such policy has a direct effect on opportunities for farmers, and it explains the need for the rhetorics of defense described in a previous chapter, particularly the version that emphasizes the economic importance of tobacco: *it paid the taxes, it put the kids through school, it bought the farm.*

Meanwhile, the dominant rhetorics of transition and diversification are so strong that farmers and agriculture extension agents alike express surprise at their own realizations of the number of farmers that are still raising tobacco (echoing the “surprised” tone of the news articles mentioned above). One agent began keeping a list of tobacco farmers after I asked him to introduce me to growers in his county. He described what he learned from making this list during an interview with me several months later:

Yeah there’s, way more than, I had guessed... After the buyout and stuff you know a lot people got out. And so I was guessing that there’d just be, you know, a couple dozen or something. [...] But, just out of curiosity I started [listing] everybody that, you know mentioned they were raising tobacco or I’d drive by and see that they had it or I did a soil test for ‘em or whatever- I started writing their name down and, and I’m still everyday, not everyday, every week maybe, every couple weeks, hear of somebody new that I didn’t realize is raising tobacco

that is. And it's, it's easily several dozen still so I'm, yeah I'm surprised, how many there are. (K. Bishop)

Dan Grigson told me, "I think we have more people growing tobacco now than I thought we would, I really do. There are folks who are growing tobacco now that I didn't dream would ever continue to grow tobacco." Similarly, farmers tell me that each year other farmers vow that this will be their last tobacco crop, but they return to the fields to raise another the next year. Will Snell described it this way in our interview:

But you know most, tobacco farmers quit in December and January and [in] March and April they change their minds. Um, I don't think- that one slide I showed you about acreage going down nine percent [this year, 2008] those were based upon March planting intentions, I don't think we'll go down, that much. For one the companies- PM did make some price revisions, uh, number two um, you know sun comes out, warms up eventually [*laugh*]. You know "what am I gonna do with this patch of land, I'll raise a little bit of tobacco."

According to Grigson and other agents and farmers I have spoken with, some farmers who stopped raising tobacco just before or after the buyout are now coming back to the crop. I have also heard repeatedly that if a solution to the labor shortage were to be found, farmers would flock back to tobacco. Many also suspect that when the ten-year buyout payments end, some farmers will come back to tobacco because they will need the income, and they already have the equipment and barns. Will Snell recently suggested that the current economic recession and loss of off-farm employment may also be bringing farmers back to tobacco (Snell "Census").

In January 2008, the Dean of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture welcomed attendees to production seminars held at a tobacco expo sponsored by the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association. In his remarks, Dean Smith directly

addressed the erasure of tobacco from the discursive landscape, commenting that he gets upset when he hears people talk about the “decline” of agriculture generally and of tobacco specifically; he particularly resents the many people that he hears say “now that we don’t grow tobacco...” He told those gathered that “we need to educate people that we’re here” and assured us that he was “glad to show that the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture is still dedicated to tobacco. We’re here as long as you’re here.” Roger Quarles told me, “yeah we’ve heard comments ‘Golly I didn’t realize anybody raised tobacco anymore’ [...] I’m not sure how they came to that conclusion. I assume that maybe when they heard about, the buyout that that meant, there was prob’ly a misconception that, that meant you weren’t allowed to grow it anymore and that certainly was never the case” (5/20/08).

In response to my question about whether he perceives an assumption that “tobacco is gone,” Will Snell commented:

Yeah I mean even in this state here we, talk about the “post-tobacco era.” Uh, and granted you’ve lost a lot of participants as part of the program- or part of the, the industry. But, as I said those, five six thousand farmers that are still left growing, um, most of ‘em are doing fairly well.

The fact that the 2007 Census of Agriculture confirmed over eight thousand rather than five or six thousand tobacco farms only serves to further prove his point.

Thus far throughout this chapter, I have argued that there are competing discourses about the future of tobacco and of diversified agriculture, and that the dominant discourse fails to acknowledge the number of farmers that continue to raise tobacco as compared to

those who participate in “diversified” agriculture. There are of course many farmers who have successfully moved away from tobacco farming, and their experiences prove illustrative of both what is at stake and what is involved in diversifying. Such success stories both counter the failed diversification narratives told by tobacco proponents and unmask realities of diversification that go unacknowledged in dominant discourses. They also demonstrate the role that gender plays in diversification. The following success story will serve as a bridge to a discussion of these issues.

### **A Model of Diversification: Evans Orchards**

Until he was eight years old, Kevan Evans lived on a tobacco and cattle farm in Fleming County, Kentucky, that had been in his family since the early nineteenth century. In 1960, his family moved to a Scott County farm that belonged to his mother’s side of the family, where they continued to raise tobacco and cattle. He raised tobacco on his Scott County farm until 1999, when their current agritourism operation (a farm intentionally remade as a public space, including an orchard, farm stand, play area, and concession stand) had become sufficiently established; he later sold off all of his cattle as well. By the 1990s, competition for tobacco acreage in this part of Central Kentucky had become stiff, and so he and his father were having a hard time raising enough tobacco to support their families.<sup>192</sup> According to Kevan, “We knew with the regulations and the lawsuits and all the, the mess that tobacco was in we thought, eventually one day, you know that

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<sup>192</sup> Scott County is in Central Kentucky which, along with Western Kentucky, was among the most expensive regions for renting burley quotas (Brown, Snell and Tiller). Scott County is also at the center of horse country, and Lexington is in the adjacent county; for these reasons land values are high. Kevan joked at one point that he would be a lot better off just selling his farm and living on the proceeds, but he loved farming.



was gonna be a lot of that was gonna be gone” (9/18/07). As it became necessary for tobacco farmers to raise more and more tobacco in order to maintain their farm incomes, Kevan faced the prospect of leasing farms in different parts of their county, as many farmers were doing, which meant a lot of driving between farms.<sup>193</sup> According to Kevan,

You started seeing guys that would raise you know 50 to 100 acres of tobacco versus 5 or 10. [...] And that’s what we weren’t set up to do, because we were a big beef cattle operation so we had to spend a lot of time you know you had to balance it. We tried to be diversified in case you know tobacco was- bad weather, on tobacco- you had beef cattle you had hay, you know all those different things so when one kinda failed you had something else to fall back on. (9/18/07)

He and his dad had long had a good relationship with the University of Kentucky, whose research farm is just a few miles away from the Evans farm, and frequently participated in research projects. Such experimentation and a belief in a diversified farm operation seem to have made Kevan particularly open to new ideas—although both these qualities certainly describe many farmers who continue to raise tobacco, as I will discuss. His wife works at the local elementary school and, according to Kevan, she has not played a large role on the farm.

In the early 1990s, the Scott County farmers market opened, and Kevan asked his daughter Jenny—a high school student at the time—if she’d like to grow some vegetables to sell at the new market. He presented it to her as an experiment that might help her to earn a little money for college, and it turned out to be a very successful venture that added a surprising income to the farm. They planted a two-acre garden that first year, participated in the farmers market, and became active members of a vegetable

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<sup>193</sup> Alice Baesler, who, with her husband, raises over 300 acres of tobacco on multiple farms around Central Kentucky, told me that one month they had a fuel bill—just for vehicles, not farm machinery—that was over \$4000. This was before gas surged to \$4 a gallon in the summer of 2008.

cooperative that was forming at the time. They soon became interested in orchards, and with advice from other orchard owners they began planting trees in the fall of 1994. By the fall of 1997, as their first apple crop ripened, they had decided to try to bring customers out to the farm as an alternative to getting up at 4 a.m. to go to the farmers market, and so they built a small shed next to their tobacco barn from which they sold produce and apples. Kevan remarked that his dad didn't want the shed attached to the tobacco barn for fear of damaging it, implying that his father was not convinced that this new turn of the operation would work. Two years later, they had grown out of the shed and needed to expand their space, and they were making enough money on vegetables that Kevan stopped raising tobacco.<sup>194</sup>

Their timing was perfect, as the tobacco settlement money was just becoming available, and they were among the first to apply for and receive funding from the Agricultural Development Board, with which they were able to renovate the tobacco barn into a sales space, cider mill, and storage facility. Throughout this time, Jenny had worked with her dad while completing an agriculture economics degree at the University of Kentucky; once she graduated she worked on the farm seasonally, and she worked other jobs the rest of the year. They were not yet able to support her fulltime on the farm, so she entered a cycle of finding jobs and then quitting them once the season got going. When they received funding in 2001, she was able to devote herself fulltime to the farm.

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<sup>194</sup> Although Kevan didn't mention it directly, it may be that the huge quota cuts that year affected his decision to stop raising it that particular year. In 1999 farmers saw a 29% cut followed by a 45% cut in 2000.

Jenny was never interested in tobacco farming, which meant she'd never thought of staying on the farm to work until their new venture proved successful. I asked her about her role on the farm growing up, when her father still raised tobacco and cattle.

We would spend our summers chopping out rows in the tobacco[ ...] I didn't mind setting tobacco but I never got to do that because he got to do- my brother got to do that. But anyways uh, but yeah that was pretty much my extent, you know I would pull plants in the morning and. I got to do that when they had you know, when you actually grew the plants not on float beds or anything and, chopping out tobacco and following the setter. That was pretty much my extent. (9/18/07)

The first year of vegetable production, when she was still in high school, she was physically involved in planting and harvesting the vegetables, but she soon discovered that her skills and interests were in the marketing aspects of the developing operation. She describes the arrangement this way, "The more we kinda figured out, dad grew the vegetables better and I did better selling, you know that was kind of my, doing displays and that kind of thing so. [...] He grows it and produces it more and than I'll sell it and do that kind of end of it" (9/18/07).

I interviewed Kevan and Jenny together and, in line with their roles in the business, when I asked them to describe their current operation Kevan answered first with a description of how many acres of crops and orchards they have, and Jenny jumped in with a description of the many aspects of agritourism they now offer. At the time of our interview, September 2007, they were farming about fifteen acres of vegetables, and their orchards included eight acres of apples, two of pears, and about three acres of peaches; they had recently added blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries. According to Jenny, "We're moving more to- we have the store here and the entertainment. [...] You know a

lot of people want a ‘you pick’ and come out here for more of the experience, and we’ve got the play area” (9/18/07). This growing play area includes a corn maze, rope maze, large wooden play structure and slide, and other things designed to entertain children, most of which are “simple.” Kevan and Jenny both expressed a desire to provide a particular “experience” for visitors. Kevan commented, “Well, you don’t wanna look like a fair or something, where you got a lot of inflatable stuff, you know it doesn’t look agricultural- They’re wanting the experience to come out on a farm, you know to visit a farm they want it to be, somewhat farm themed” (9/18/07).

They give school tours, host festivals and petting zoos, and serve concessions. The store has grown to include items made on site—apple butter, jams, apple cider donuts, fried apple pies, fudge, and of course apples and produce—as well as food and craft products made by others, including a “Kentucky Proud” corner of foods grown and produced in Kentucky. They make their own cider and also make cider for other orchards in the area in a semi-co-operative arrangement (they buy the apples from other orchards, make cider with the mix of apples and sell it back to the orchards, bottled with that orchard’s own label). They continue to be active participants in the farmers market—despite an early plan to stop selling at the market, and all the work involved in hauling produce to sell, they have continued to sell at the farmers market because of both the income and the marketing opportunity it provides for their business.

They received an agritourism grant from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture—again they were in the first round of recipients of this new source of funding—in order to convert the original shed into a commercial kitchen, allowing them more space in which to produce their food products and to prepare and serve meals.

They sold over 15,000 fried pies in 2006. Jenny has been fulltime since 2001, they have multiple seasonal employees (both in the farming and service portions of the business), and they may soon need to hire an additional fulltime employee.

Kevan described both the challenges of making this transition and the things he brought to it. I asked what kinds of knowledge transferred from his past farming experience, and he replied:

Well like spraying, watering, you know and the soil fertility and those type of things and and when you're scouting. Cause we sc- you know, we don't just random put a spray on, we're scouting to look for bugs or look for disease problems and those type things so. This was just a carryover from some of those others- I mean you had to learn new diseases, you know new bugs and those type of things but. A lot of that stuff just carried over from other crops. So it wadn't that bad. But you did have to learn you know when is this apple ripe, and what do I need to be doing, how do I need to trim that tree to do what I want it to do. So, I mean we've made a lot of errors that a way that's- a lot of it's trial and error.  
(9/18/07)

One challenge he identified was a financial one, "We're doing this, it's not generational like- If I do something I gotta have a new piece of equipment because it's not there." I asked if marketing was a major difference between their current operation and raising tobacco, and he responded,

Oh, that's totally, I mean that- That's the biggest difference. 'Cause you know with tobacco if you did what you're supposed to do, you had a guaranteed product, a guaranteed sale for what you had. And all this is, is marketing. I mean it's just, being a farmer, a lot of people can raise it, but being able to sell it. Jenny does an excellent job with that and, if we can get a good enough product here, and draw enough people here to buy it, than that's where your tourism you know entertainment type stuff, a lot of that brings 'em here to do that. Then you've got the product there that you can move. (9/18/07)

### **Traditional Kentucky Farming: Tobacco and Cattle**

It would be easy to simply categorize Kevan Evans as a farmer who, in contrast to tobacco farmers, welcomes new ideas and the opportunity to try new things; this is certainly the conclusion supported by the dominant perspective. However, although Kevan certainly is that, such a judgment provides an over-simplification of the current situation for Kentucky farmers, and provides no insight into the decisions they must make in this transition period. In a comment that echoed those of others within the world of tobacco farming, Will Snell told me (also quoted above), “Well. You know, the classic argument is ‘just raise something else.’ And you know that’s easy to say but, it all comes down to economics and then just, other crops are not as profitable.” In addition to the inability to “replace” tobacco economically, there are symbolic equivalences at stake that are less obvious from an agricultural economist’s perspective.

Despite commonly held stereotypes of farmers as stubborn and old-fashioned, and particularly—as in the diversification discourse described above—tobacco farmers as perhaps the most resistant to change, tobacco farmers have in fact proven to be quite willing to adopt new innovations. Farmers adopted MH-30 (“sucker dope”) in the 1960s, baling tobacco in the early 1980s, and float beds in the 1990s; all of these represent rapid and substantial technological changes. The following story told to me by Ben Crain is representative of many stories I heard about fathers and grandfathers, and their willingness to change. He was telling me about his grandfather, who passed away in the early 60s, and I asked if he was around when sucker control was introduced.

Crain: Yes he was and it’s very interesting that you should bring that up. Um, I guess um I was the, the only grandson at the time, um or the oldest grandson. And that was in the 50s now I’m talking about. So I was always given a half acre of

tobacco, that that was- that was my half acre that I shared with my grandfather. So I'd get my half interest of a half acre. And in roughly the mid 50s, the advent of the sucker control, um, came about. Um Dad sug- planted the seed "why don't we try it on Ben's crop?" So, that was finally agreed upon. My grandfather said we were gonna ruin it. We were gonna ruin that crop o' tobacco. And it was a good one. But uh, after uh, we sprayed and sprayed and did it all [...] And the tobacco on either side of my, my half acre, was just full o' suckers and, at that time we would go in and break out after topping, of course, then would allow the suckers to come back. And then roughly two weeks ten days before, housing we would go through the tobacco again and break out all the suckers in the plant, on the plant, with the exception of the top two. And we'd leave those two. And they would be removed just prior to cutting. Okay. So but anyhow my, my half acre did not have a sucker on it and it was absolutely beautiful and yellow when we cut it. And I think uh again we saw the hand-writing on the wall there. No more suckers.

Ann: So, he was in agreement?

Crain: Oh yeah, after that. Yeah absolutely. (12/17/07)

According to Crain, his grandfather had only to see an innovation such as sucker control work, and he was willing to accept it, a point to which I will return.

As I described in Chapter 2, farmers moved from tying tobacco into hands to compressing it in bales rapidly—it effectively took just three years (not including the research and development of the technology), from 1980 to 1983—as compared to the spread of other agricultural innovations such as the adoption of hybrid corn.<sup>195</sup> A well-known diffusion study published in 1943, which examined the adoption of hybrid corn beginning with the release of hybrid seeds in 1928, found that it took an average of nine years for Iowa farmers to move to hybrid seed despite evidence that the new seeds would increase their yields by about 20% and ease the job of harvesting.<sup>196</sup> This and other

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<sup>195</sup> Of course tobacco companies, resistant to bales at first, eventually required farmers to market their tobacco in bales. However, by that time the vast majority of farmers were baling their tobacco.

<sup>196</sup> See Rogers for a summary of this study, 31-35. However, also see Apodaca for a brief discussion of an attempt by a county extension agent in the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico to introduce hybrid corn to Spanish American farmers, an attempt that failed because the agent did not take cultural practices into

diffusion studies quantify respondent characteristics in order to categorize respondents (as innovators, late adopters, etc.) and determine what characteristics (such as income and education levels) serve as predictors of rates of adoption of new technologies. A “pro-innovation bias” has been a major source of critique of diffusion studies (Rogers 100).

While I am not interested in countering the “pro-innovation bias” with a “pro-tradition bias” I am interested in understanding farmers’ perspectives on the role of tradition in their decisions about what crops to grow. In this sense then, my perspective values both tradition and innovation, but I am equally interested in moving beyond the paradigm of tradition and innovation as a dichotomy. With this in mind, I will next consider the practical impediments to replacing tobacco, those things that have been articulated to me by farmers and extension professionals and that are apparent through a comparison with the Evans as an example of a successfully diversified farm. I will then move to those things that go somewhat unarticulated but underlie current debates and perceptions of “transition” and “diversification,” the role of gender as traditionalized performance.

### *Tradition and the Replacement of Tobacco*

Martin Henson told me in our April 2007 interview, “I get asked every now and then ‘why you raising, still raising tobacco?’ ‘Tradition’ ’s what I tell ‘em.” He also told me,

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account. According to Apodaca, “He had paid attention to the relations between agricultural technology and the environmental conditions, and to those between farming practices and the social organization of the community. He failed, however, to inquire into the food habits and their influence on selection of crops... He learned that the interests and wishes of the village women had to be taken into account... Finally, he found that in the system of values of the community, corn quality was more important than corn quantity” (503).



“I’m old-fashioned. My wife says uh ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’ she says ‘he does not like change’ and I don’t, I don’t.”

“Tradition” is of course a central concept for folklorists, but a complex concept that we and other scholars have increasingly thought, as Dan Ben-Amos put it, not just *with* but *about* (“Seven Strands”). Despite our efforts to rethink our use of this term, “tradition” continues to be employed in both scholarly and everyday usage as what Kenneth Burke calls a polar term, a term with implied opposites such as change, creativity, innovation, dynamism, and modernity.<sup>197</sup> As recently as 2005, James Bau Graves described tradition as the “synergetic opposite” of innovation and “the rock for innovation to push against” (43). As I discussed in the last chapter, scholars such as Dell Hymes and Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin have complicated our understanding of tradition, treating it as process rather than object. This understanding leads to questions about how tobacco growers understand tradition. What did Martin mean, for instance, when he told me that tradition is what he tells people when asked why he continues to raise tobacco?

It was later in this same interview that Martin exclaimed, “This technology’s great!” From a perspective of understanding tradition as static, rather than always in a process of change, this seems to contradict his statement about not wanting to change—and my fieldnotes following this interview reflect my confusion. The transcription process allowed me to consider the context of the two seemingly incongruous statements. His exclamation that “This technology’s great!” occurred following his story about his move from plant beds planted in the ground to polystyrene seed trays floated in water

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<sup>197</sup> For “polar terms” see Burke “Definition of Man” 11.

beds, while his description of himself as “old-fashioned” and resistant to change came during a discussion of the difference between growing tobacco versus vegetable crops and in response to my question, “You think it’d be hard to transition into something else?” While Martin praises technology within the context of tobacco-related innovations, he refers to himself as unwilling to change when discussing the move that some farmers are making to other crops and in response to a direct question about whether he’d find it difficult to join them.

According to Henry Glassie, “Change and tradition are commonly coupled, in chat and chapter titles, as antonyms. But tradition is the opposite of only one kind of change: that in which disruption is so complete that the new cannot be read as an innovative adaptation of the old” (395). As I learned from Martin and others, change is understood as part of the tradition of raising tobacco rather than as a force to be fought off. Some of the tobacco farmers with whom I interacted were described by others, particularly by extension agents, as particularly innovative. These were farmers who worked closely with the Cooperative Extension, testing new technologies such as mechanical harvesters, non-conventional curing structures, and conservation tillage equipment. For Martin and other tobacco growers, growing tomatoes would be a complete disruption of farming tradition while many of the changes that have taken place in tobacco are welcomed parts of the tradition, at least in hindsight.

While it may be widely understood that tobacco farming is a “tradition,” and that tobacco farmers have traditional knowledge that is unique, there are differences in emic

and etic uses of the term in such a context.<sup>198</sup> In common usage the term all too often refers to outmoded and “old-fashioned” ways, and is understood as a restrictive and emotionally-driven force. Adherence to tradition is often associated with nostalgia rather than anything in the realm of the practical or the tangible.<sup>199</sup> Although as Handler and Linnekin have argued, tradition is not “a core of inherited cultural traits whose continuity and boundedness are analogous to that of a natural object,” but is instead “a wholly symbolic construction” (273), this does not change the fact that particularized emic constructions encompass aspects of the intangible as well as the tangible.

When Martin told me he continues to raise tobacco because “it’s tradition,” he was not telling me that he was emotionally bound to the crop or even, in Handler and Linneken’s terms, to his “symbolic construction” of the crop as it represents a way of life. He may be, but tobacco is also both what he knows and what he is materially equipped to grow, and he is bound by material and economic ties to the crop that are part of his understanding of tobacco as “traditional” for him. This became even more evident when I asked for clarification about his use of “tradition.”

Ann: You said earlier that people, when people ask why you grow tobacco you say “tradition”—can you say more about what you mean by that?

Martin: Oh it’s just...sum it up in one word [*laughing*]. Well uh, I still use it- [for] income. Uh [*overlapping* A: But is it just about income?] But I just tell people tradition, you know, cause uh, you know. Uh, income. And uh, I still uh, I’ve got neighbors that uh, go into vegetables and stuff like that. [A: um-hm] I still think tobacco’s easier than vegetables. I haven’t got into the vegetables, but uh, I don’t like to pick beans. Be hard on my back [*slight laugh*]. (4/27/07)

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<sup>198</sup> See Pike for the distinction between emic and etic, often used by folklorists more broadly than Pike’s usage, to refer to insider and outsider perspectives in addition to language.

<sup>199</sup> While this statement may appear to reinforce a dichotomous understanding of the emotional versus the practical, I mean to problematize rather than reinforce such a dichotomy.

I've asked a question that would be hard for anyone to answer—to articulate the meaning of tradition—and clearly Martin has trouble answering it, signified by the multiple false starts and “uh”s (many more than is the norm throughout the interview). But what he does say—and what I didn't hear until I transcribed it—is important. I was surprised and a bit embarrassed to hear my own resistance to Martin's linking of “tradition” with income, when I asked “But is it just about income?” It is obvious to me now that I wanted Martin to talk about intangible aspects of tradition—perhaps to wax on about his emotional relationship with tobacco—and instead he was telling me that tobacco is important for the income it continues to provide him and his family, and that its economic value is central to his understanding of it as a “tradition.” For him, the tangible and intangible values of the crop are tied together, making “replacement” difficult to fathom. He was also clearly contrasting tobacco production with vegetable production.

I asked Franklin County Extension agent Keenan Bishop about differences between raising tobacco and other crops and he responded:

Everything [is different], because, with tobacco, you know even if, even if you didn't like it or, you weren't the best person at it, you know you grew up saturated in it- Your daddy did it, his daddy did it, all your uncles did it, so you you couldn't help but learn how to do it, how to do it right. So, you know you grew up in that atmosphere that culture where, you could do it with your eyes closed kind of thing. And all the farms were suited for it all the farms have tobacco barns and all the farms, you know have your little patches along the creeks or the ridge tops, you know to grow, grow the crop it was, a no-brainer kind of thing. So to do anything other than tobacco, you've gotta not only relearn, but you've gotta, regear for it. You know you, you may be able to use some of the equipment but probably not.

His response encompasses intangible traditional knowledge as well as tangible things—land, equipment—that underlie an understanding of tobacco as a traditional crop.

As Kevan Evans and Keenan both point out, farm equipment is most often inherited and/or shared within the family; a changed operation means the need to purchase new equipment, remodel barns and other structures, and otherwise retool the farm—a process that can run into the tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars. Land is of course another resource that affects a farmer's ability to make changes in his or her operation, and as I have already discussed, Kentucky farms are traditionally small and, with the exception of the western portion of the state, most are made up of rolling hills not suited for large acreages of row crops. A small farm imposes limits on diversity because there is less land to farm and less opportunity for crop and pasture rotation. A changed farming operation involves an investment of time as well as money (and time *is* money, as the saying goes): waiting for orchards or grape vines to develop, for land to lay fallow until it can be sown with organic crops, to make mistakes and learn to get it right.

Kevan also made it clear that although there is a great deal of traditional knowledge that transfers from raising tobacco to new crops, there is also a great deal of new knowledge that must be obtained: how do you know when an apple is ripe, when to pick it, how to trim the trees, how to make cider? What about diseases? While certainly tobacco farmers can learn all of these things (and many have), they must first embrace a different kind of learning process from the primary means through which they have learned to raise tobacco. Rather than learning slowly over a period of many years—by doing, informally from other farmers, as well as through more formal means from sources such as Extension—moving to new crops requires a commitment to an accelerated learning process and to the possibility (or *probability*) of vulnerability and risk.

Disrupting tradition also means upsetting the balance on the farm that has been maintained for decades by the combination of raising tobacco and cattle together. As I described in Chapter 2, the rhythm of daily life organized around tobacco and cattle has become traditionalized. A crop like bell peppers—the quintessential failed crop—requires access to a market immediately, and although tobacco requires specific knowledge about when it should be set, topped, housed, and stripped, once it is stripped, graded, and baled it can sit in the barn until it is time to take it to market (although now farmers are of course told when to bring it in to sell, whereas under the auction system they had some ability to decide for themselves). Tobacco production requires attention year-round, and producers live by the tobacco calendar, knowing each month, each day, what needs to be done with the tobacco. Transferring this knowledge to crops with completely different production cycles and marketing needs is a matter of not only gaining new knowledge but altering patterns and rhythms of everyday life, as it has long been lived.

There is a world of difference between marketing tobacco (and cattle) and marketing alternative crops, as exemplified in Kevan’s comment above. The tobacco program alleviated a farmer’s need to find a market for his or her crop, because if a tobacco buyer did not buy it at auction it would go into the pool, and the farmer received the minimum price for it. Marlon Waits told me in 2007: “As long as it was, pretty decent quality crop you had a support price. If the companies didn’t want it you still, you was guaranteed so much.” Susan Harkins described it this way:

And that’s something that tobacco did to the farmer. The beauty of the tobacco program is that it allowed the farmer to just focus on raising a product, and they

didn't have to think beyond, stripping it down, bundling it up, carrying it up to market. And laying it somewhere on a pallet. They didn't have to do anything else. [...] It was a gift, but it was a curse [...] But when you get into these smaller, items, vegetables and shrimp and different things- there is no market- you have to go create your market.

The skills needed to market tobacco in the post-buyout environment are largely the same, although as Peter Benson points out, “For farmers, contracts mean marketing access but also new pressures related to keeping tobacco clean. The trip to Philip Morris’s contract station [...] is fraught with uncertainty” (364).

Moving from tobacco to other crops requires learning entirely new skills—non-farming skills—that enable a farmer to develop or create a market, *or* it requires having a partner with those skills. In a sense, diversification requires taking on a second occupation, *entrepreneur*, in addition to *farmer*. Kevan described the need for both a different set of skills and the labor of two people. He handled the difficulty of a new farming venture by being able to focus fully on the agricultural aspects; he was free to do so only because Jenny was handling the marketing. Because Jenny is a member of his family, he was more able to take the financial risk involved in completely restructuring the farm operations. I asked if he’d be doing what he’s doing if Jenny wasn’t working with him, and he responded:

Don’t know- Don’t know if I’d do that or not. Um, because- I didn’t you know it, it takes more time, you know it’s almost a full time job raising it, and it’s almost a full time job marketing it. And uh, that would have been tough without Jenny, or somebody else in that position. To do that, to be able to do both. Especially on a retail basis. I mean, I could raise it and sell it wholesale, but it’s really- you don’t know if you can make enough money doing it wholesale. (9/18/07)

Under the tobacco program, farmers were glad to have a guaranteed minimum price as Harkins points out, but most worked to produce tobacco that would bring the *maximum* price, and so while they did not need to focus on finding a market they had to do more than “just focus on raising a product.” They focused on raising the highest quality tobacco of the grades and types that companies wanted—which has always been somewhat of a mysterious moving target and a mystery, as I have described. At every stage of production, there are decisions to be made that will affect the tobacco that the farmer will sell—what varieties to choose, what chemicals to use and how much, when to plant the beds and when to set the plants, when to top, cut, house and strip it, the weather on the day of sale, and so forth. This is the *tobacco man* knowledge described in the previous chapter. Many have expressed to me that quality became even more important under contracting, since there is no longer a pool. Even though some bemoan today’s quality, quality is beginning to be a determining factor in whether a farmer will get a contract at all. Contracts do not bind the company to buy a farmer’s crop if it is judged not to fall into the grades specified in the contract (and of course the companies now both determine the grades and apply the grades to a farmer’s tobacco, since there are no longer government graders involved).

As contracting began around 2000, the failed diversification narratives I mentioned above were being told, but with explicit comparisons between experiences with vegetables and fears about raising tobacco on contract. Former Burley Co-op CEO Danny McKinney pointed this out explicitly in an oral history interview in 2000,

Our experience with contracting, has been that the first year or two it will work pretty good. When the green pepper market comes to town, they’ll sign the



farmers up the first year or so it works pretty good, but after that, uh, whatever you've got they don't want and what they want, you don't got. And that's the problem we have with contracting.

Similarly, former tobacco farmer Judy Miller commented (partially quoted above):

We cannot blame anybody for going to contract, 'cause short term looks good. We uh, raised peppers, for a couple of years under contract, and the problem we had with that is whatever you had, if you had green ones they wanted red ones, if you had red ones they wanted green ones. And we are just afraid that, that would happen with tobacco and contracting and with the- especially with the price. Uh, once they got you going and that had to be the way it was and, what's to keep 'em from, reducing the price.

This continues to be a concern; tobacco companies want more tobacco of particular grades, leaving growers to fear that they will be stuck with tobacco outside of those grades and therefore with no value. Alice Baesler and others described another challenge of diversification as compared with tobacco, a challenge that one rarely hears in current discourses related to “eating local”:

One fellow in Midway that raised tomatoes, grew all the tomatoes you would need for Midway. So, and strawberries- you know “you pick” strawberries you can only have so many of those patches. Uh or or then nobody makes a profit, so the biggest thing is is coming up with a innovative idea, of what I can do that's a little bit different. (Baesler)

The key to successfully diversifying is to create your own niche market—and to hope that your neighbors do not attempt to emulate your success. There is an inherent irony here for folklore research, as we increasingly work to understand the effects on the “local” as “the folk” operate in increasingly “global” markets; this is the problem that Canclini and others address. From the very beginning of tobacco production by Europeans in colonial

America, tobacco has been a global industry; however, for tobacco farmers the cultural value of tobacco has been “local” because the production of a good crop of tobacco was central to a local identity as a “tobacco man.” While farmers always knew that their product’s economic value was larger than local, the immediate symbolic value for them was not; local value lay instead in performance for other farmers. With the changing contexts of tobacco production and marketing, “local” performance is now losing its value; stigma has tarnished the symbolic value of the crop and the traditional practice of raising it. Meanwhile, tobacco farmers are becoming increasingly aware of their roles in a global market, as manufacturers buy more overseas tobacco, and therefore farmers see themselves as in competition with farmers in places such as Zimbabwe whom they will never meet. In addition, one reason that many tobacco farmers feel secure in the future of the crop is the rising rates of smoking in China and other parts of Asia; so even though Americans are quitting smoking, farmers see the Chinese (whom they will also never meet) as potential customers (which also helps them to further distance their tobacco cultivation from the health effects of smoking). However, within this increasingly “global” world, diversification rhetorics ask tobacco farmers to move from global to more local markets (the opposite challenge from that faced by traditional artists most often considered by folklorists). As Alice points out, however, if tobacco farmers all replaced tobacco with vegetables for sale at the local level, none of them would survive. This is a problem that the “locavore” movement has yet to face.

The tobacco market is also, according to Roger Quarles, less subject to dramatic swings in pricing.

[Y]ou know most markets work in cycles, that's one thing about the tobacco market it's very steady, it plods along, and it doesn't have these huge swings. [...] Cattle were up high a year ago, now they're not worth raising according to some people. And goats fit the same thing. Uh any crop you pick uh, will almost fit those cycles but, tobacco that is it's a very, a very uh dependable crop [...] It's one of the, very few I know of, that, that you can have some reasonable expectation, about what your income is gonna be this coming year. I mean you're not gonna get enough to, uh, you know get rich in any one year but, but then you know, you're not gonna go broke either. You're not subject to the market swings that uh, that some of these other crops are. (5/20/08)

While some would disagree with Quarles' confidence in the stability of the tobacco market (pointing, for instance to the drastic quota cuts in the late 1990s), it is true that prices—with exceptions—go up and down incrementally as compared with other commodities. His point about the lack of stability in other markets echoes the fears expressed in failed diversification narratives about replacing tobacco with vegetables.

A large part of the challenge of marketing is related to product quality, including specific aesthetic qualities expected by consumers. According to Kevan Evans,

Jenny and Sue, my wife- were real sticklers of quality. I couldn't take a second, any vegetable that was a second, [...] you know we didn't put it on the shelf, they just didn't allow it. "Oh, Dad, this is not worth it." You know, and we'd take it off. You know I was from that old school where, you know okay, "it's eatable!" Edible, you know you should be able to put it on the shelf. But the customer's already got used to Kroger and stuff you know it just, it had to be a just number one grade 'A' apple. (9/24/06)

Here, Kevan describes what he sees as a major break with tradition, made clear when he describes himself as "from that old school." But this is not a simple case of gender stereotypes, of women being more concerned with appearance than men. This is instead about the inseparability of the symbolic and economic value of tobacco production.

Tobacco farmers have "traditionally" taken a great deal of pride in how their tobacco

looks—some say in order to improve the price, others say just for the pride of it. Tying a “pretty” hand of tobacco was a source of male pride, and traditional aesthetics transferred from hands to bales as many farmers continue to strive for an aesthetic ideal when baling their tobacco, just as they did when they tied hands and carefully laid them on baskets. Noel Wise said in reference to a bale of tobacco during our interview, “Boy it was a pretty thing to look at, you know he’d put a lot of time into it.”

Raising new crops involves more than the transfer of an aesthetic system, it requires learning a new system; tobacco aesthetics cannot simply be transferred to tomatoes as they were from hands to bales. Martin Henson and I discussed farmers that were moving to vegetable production, and he told me:

I’d be afraid that um, I’d raise a bunch o’ tomatoes or something and they wouldn’t, they’d have a speck on ‘em or something they wouldn’t take ‘em. [laugh] I mean you know. When you go to the market, you’re, the producer is, is, the low man on the totem pole. ... The customer, you gotta do what the customer wants. (4/27/07)

And yet, Martin recognizes that it is no different for him as a tobacco farmer, as he went on to say, “But uh, course you know the customer’s always right. You know, that’s the way it is on everything. The companies they’re always right, when we take our tobacco there. That’s it, bottom line.” Martin and other tobacco farmers, as described by Keenan Bishop, above, have lived and breathed the knowledge of how to raise tobacco so that it looks like it should look. As Kevan Evans described (and Martin implied), vegetable production requires the ability to sort out the products that consumers want from those they do not and to destroy the rest.

## **Gendered Knowledge/Gendered Transition**

Jenny Evans' role at Evans Orchard provides an important example of gendered aspects of the current transition period in Kentucky farming. Women are playing important roles on farms involved in experimental diversification—from vegetables and flowers for farmers markets to wineries and agritourism. Importantly, however, these women also represent the continuation of a wider gendered agricultural history, as their efforts can be understood as an extension of women's traditional roles on the farm. What was once viewed as supplemental income is in many cases becoming central. Even such a seemingly non-traditional operation as Evans Orchards can be understood as an extension of tradition, as Jenny and her mother make jams, pies, and other food products for sale.<sup>200</sup> There is a long tradition of women selling the products of their labor—those things they were already producing—when they had a surplus and/or money was needed to cover expenses. Tobacco farmer and warehouseman Jerry Rankin told me, “My mother sold eggs every weekend- I mean every Saturday. [...] She sold them at the grocery store [...] and] she would sell frying chickens. And and cream and milk. And have money left over after she brought her groceries.” According to Lu Ann Jones, “Early twentieth-century southern farm women's production for market grew out of their production for home use” (52). Similarly, Lorraine Garkovich and Janet Bokemeier note that “Women often used surpluses from goods produced for household consumption to produce goods they could

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<sup>200</sup> Although Kevan and Jenny both said that Ms. Evans doesn't play much of a role in the operation because she works off the farm, Jenny did talk about her mother's role in teaching her to make the products that they are selling in their shop. This suggests that the production of jams and pies and other such goods may not be considered farm work, which certainly aligns with the traditionally understood separate spheres of home and farm.

either sell to local store owners directly for cash or trade to them for in-kind purchases” (216).

Lu Ann Jones describes a woman in 1920s South Carolina who began to sell “butterbeans and peas, eggs and butter, blackberries gathered from the woods” in order to meet her children’s needs, and eventually became a successful sales woman at a curb market in nearby Columbia (49). Women’s productivity was not limited to curb markets; their trade patterns spread out from the farm and into groceries and general stores, as they, for instance, traded their eggs for the few items they didn’t produce. The store owners with whom they traded gathered the eggs and traded them to “wholesale merchants located in towns and cities” (L. Jones 57). “The primary commodities in [women’s] market production were eggs and dairy products, but women also transformed other products of their household labor, such as baked goods, clothing, or crafts, into exchange commodities” (Garkovich and Bokemeier 216).

Jones tells the story of a Tennessee woman who went from trading small amounts of butter to neighbors, to shipping twenty-five pounds of butter a week to customers in Birmingham, Alabama, “neatly” packaged in a box of her own construction. “Although her customers could have bought cheaper butter, one patron told her, ‘it is not fixed up nicely like yours.’” The woman concluded, “‘Fixing up things’ means something” (62). Women then, it might be argued, have long understood the idea of “value-added”—a catch-phrase in today’s arena of professionalized diversified agriculture.

According to Jones, in the early twentieth century, “Women’s production for market both complemented cash-crop agriculture and shielded their farms and their families against the vagaries of the market for staple commodities” (52). As an example

of the valuing of women's contributions to the farm, and, I would argue, women's traditionalized valuing of diversification, Jones points to comments she heard repeatedly in oral history interviews with those who grew up on farms in the early part of the century, such as "we never went hungry" and "we never missed a meal." I heard these same comments in interviews with older farmers, as they looked back on their childhoods in which their families had little as compared to today's farmers, but they were "never hungry" largely due to their mothers' labor.

Women saw their families through bad crop years and times as tough as the Great Depression. As farms industrialized and American consumerism became increasingly centralized, women's productivity on farms declined (Sachs). Diversified agriculture in Kentucky and elsewhere seems to be an example of a reversal, however small-scaled it may be. The following exchange took place during an interview I conducted with Charlene and Charles Long in 2005, telling a gendered story of farm diversification.

Charlene: We've got one over on 31E they, he started it as a little crop for his wife. She wanted to make a little extra money. Well she raised tomatoes and vegetables. Well... it boomed out for them. They built them- they've got [a] roadside stand and [...]they'll have a big Fall Day and everything. They sell tomatoes to all the places around. They sell Olive Garden stuff, they raise pumpkins. And everything and he said "Oh they was a whole lot more money in that than tobacco and really not much more work."

Charles: yeah

Ann: Was that a surprise to them?

Charlene: I think it was him because he didn't really [...] He give her an acre out there to work the first year. And then the next year she wanted more, and after he seen what she was making and all, he decided to go into it big time [...]

Charles: We are a people that's— We do not want to change. But if you, if you can show us that change is good we'll [...] we will change.

“Diversification” from this perspective can be understood as the professionalization of traditional women’s work. As in so many cases in which work traditionally carried out by women has been professionalized, the status has changed, and women’s contributions are ignored (the most obvious and oft-cited example is the woman “cook” versus the male “chef”). This suggests that in order for diversification efforts to work, perhaps there needs to be a regendering of vegetable and flower production; or perhaps presenting it as discontinuous from the history of women’s work will prove to be enough? Certainly current opportunities to apply for funding from the state in the form of grants and loans from the Agricultural Development Board and other sources is one such attempt to professionalize such forms of farming.

In recent years much scholarship in the area of gender and agriculture has focused on “alternative” and “sustainable” farms, asking questions about whether such farms are locations of gender equity in ways that conventional farms are not.<sup>201</sup> According to an oft-cited discussion of alternative agriculture by Curtis E. Beus and Riley E. Dunlap, the move from conventional to alternative agriculture requires a multifaceted paradigm shift: from dependence to independence, centralization to decentralization, competition to community, domination of nature to harmony with nature, specialization to diversity, and

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<sup>201</sup> “Alternative” agriculture/farming is used differently in different contexts. Here it refers to farm practices. According to the National Research Council, “Alternative agriculture is not a single system of farming practices. It includes a spectrum of farming systems, ranging from organic systems that attempt to use no purchased synthetic chemical inputs, to those involving the prudent use of pesticides or antibiotics to control specific pests or diseases” (4). The term is also used (and I have used it) to refer to the movement to new crops. Cf. Thirsk who examines the history of alternative agriculture in England. Thirsk distinguishes “alternative” agriculture from “mainstream” agriculture, which she defines as cereals and meat. “Sustainability” is used in a general sense to refer to systemic changes in consideration of the impact of farm practices on the environment, as well as the health of the consumer. It also implies decisions in the present that ensure a sustainable future (for the environment, the consumer, and the farmer).



exploitation to restraint (Beus and Dunlap 598-599). Marta B. Chiappe and Cornelia Butler Flora argue that while alternative agriculture, based on these binaries, would seem to reflect traditionally female perspectives and values, the movement has been heavily male-centered. Further, Alan Hall and Veronika Mogyorodý have argued that a move from conventional to alternative agriculture does not necessarily lead to gender equity on the farm. In their study of conventional organic versus alternative organic farming, they found that alternative organic farming “has the potential to alter gender relations in agriculture” but this potential may or may not be realized; “most organic farms are conventional in their gender relations” (311-312).<sup>202</sup> Similarly, Alison C. Meares set out to find out if there were gendered implications in terms of “quality of life” on farms moving from conventional to sustainable farming, and found that the improvements that come with sustainability improve men’s quality of life more than women’s, primarily because women’s responsibilities in the home do not change. She identifies three spheres: the productive sphere of the farm, the reproductive sphere of the home, and the sphere of community involvement, and argues that women move in and out of these spheres more frequently than do men.

This scholarship has focused on gendered divisions of labor and decision making as correlated with farming paradigms. These scholars do not use the term “tradition,” but they are looking at traditional versus non-traditional gender roles, divisions of labor, and decision-making practices. As they compare different approaches to farming, they find little change in the traditionalized performance of gender, even as farming traditions

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<sup>202</sup> In distinguishing between conventional organic and alternative organic farming Hall and Mogyorodý relied on “eight main indicators”: “labor intensity, level of mechanization, farm size, farm growth, reliance on wage labor, reliance on off-farm inputs, debt load, and marketing practices” (294).

change. Like other scholarship related to agriculture and gender discussed in the previous chapter, these scholars do not consider the specific farm products that are being raised or the decision-making about the actual move to different crops, whether alternative, organic, or conventional.<sup>203</sup> Researchers have looked both at the differences between those in the broad categories of conventional and alternative, among similar types of farmers (such as between alternative and conventional organic farmers, cf. Hall and Mogyorody), and among alternative farmers (cf. Hall's consideration of farmers using conservation tillage versus organic farmers), but they do not seem to be asking questions about women's roles in the move to new (alternative) crops. In my observations, this is an important question to ask in the case of Kentucky farmers that have made this move.

Several of those I interviewed agreed with this assessment. For instance, I asked Will Snell what he thought about my observation that those farms moving to other crops had the involvement of both men and women, and he responded,

Yeah, I think maybe- and probably another area like equine that you may have more female involvement. Uh, not only fruits and vegetables but also cut flowers. And farmers markets I imagine, a lot of these farmers markets you go to you certainly see, probably more females there than males. In terms of vendors.

Alan Hall found that one of the few differences between the conservation tillage and organic farmers that he studied was that, on organic farms, women are more likely to do the research needed to make the move to organics, including reading and attending workshops and classes (219). Here, I am reminded generally of the conferences and

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<sup>203</sup> Hall and Mogyorody do, however, note women's roles more generally in the move to organic farming practices, including an example of one woman's organic garden as the origin of a much larger organic farming operation.

workshops sponsored by the group Kentucky Women in Agriculture (mentioned in the last chapter), as well as Jenny Evans' role at Evans Orchard, as she talked about involvement in marketing seminars and other kinds of training related to the operation of the business. Women have often kept the books on the farm, handling at least a portion of the "business" side of things. This too, can be understood as a predecessor to the role that women such as Jenny Evans now fill, managing particular aspects of the business; only now, this role is becoming increasingly public.

Amy Traugher argues that "productivist [or conventional] agricultural models marginalize women from spaces of knowledge, while sustainable agriculture provides spaces of empowerment for women farmers" through participation in sustainable agriculture organizations (290). Although she, too, is interested primarily in understanding the gendered division of labor, she notes that women are more likely than men to specialize in fruit and vegetable farming, and argues that this is in part why the number of male farmers is declining while the number of female farmers grows.<sup>204</sup>

Traugher's bigger interest, however, is in understanding sustainable agriculture organizations as differently gendered than such other farm-related spaces as "equipment dealerships, grain elevators, and the local town halls, which are largely dominated and occupied by men" (296). Women farmers whom I interviewed described experiences of marginalization in male gendered spaces such as farm supply stores. Although organic farmer Susan Harkins did not express a feeling of marginalization herself, she told me that "farming has always been a good old boy business [...and ...] you have some

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<sup>204</sup> According to the USDA, "One of the most significant changes in the 2007 Census of Agriculture is the increase in female farm operators, both in terms of the absolute number and the percentage of all principal operators. There were 306,209 female principal operators counted in 2007, up from 237,819 in 2002 – an increase of almost 30 percent." (2007 Census of Agriculture: Demographics 1)

challenges that I don't think men, probably have but when it comes down to the actual operations and work, yeah we all have the same challenges. But, breaking into, the community the farming community, yeah I think women have had an uphill battle but I think they're there." I experienced many such male spaces during my fieldwork, including particular convenient stores at lunch time, tobacco warehouses, and a Philip Morris receiving station. In addition, my experiences at public and educational events sponsored by farm organizations were very telling. For example, I was not surprised to find myself to be the lone woman at an "Innovative Tobacco Grower" workshop sponsored by the Extension Service in March 2007, and as one of only a handful of women in attendance at a Tobacco Field Day in September 2007.<sup>205</sup>

One week in January 2008, I attended both the annual meeting of the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association, along with an associated Tobacco Summit and Expo, and the annual meeting of Partners for Family Farms, an organization established in 1995 to promote sustainable agriculture in Kentucky. The demographics of the attendees at these two meetings could hardly have been more different.<sup>206</sup> I was one of only a few women in attendance at the Tobacco Summit and Expo (the exceptions were primarily women who worked for exhibiting or sponsoring organizations), while the Partnership meeting was much more diverse in terms of gender. The boards of directors of the two organizations reflect similar gendered differences; the Partnership's board is

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<sup>205</sup> The Field Day was sponsored by the University of Kentucky, Philip Morris USA, Philip Morris International, the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association, Kentucky Farm Bureau, the Council for Burley Tobacco, and the Burley Farmers Advisory Council.

<sup>206</sup> I realize I am glossing over major differences in the aims of these groups and the types of events I am describing here, but I believe my comparison holds up none the less.

evenly divided between men and women and the Co-op board is all men.<sup>207</sup> I recognized one other person (a retired agriculture extension professor) who was in attendance at both events, although there certainly may have been others that I did not recognize. This example demonstrates, however anecdotally, a division between tobacco farmers and diversified farmers in terms of their social spaces, and that these spaces are gendered.<sup>208</sup>

As a further example, I mentioned to one tobacco farmer with whom I spent a lot of time, and who attended the Tobacco Expo, that I was going to the Partners for Family Farms dinner and asked if he'd heard of the organization; I explained that they work to promote Kentucky farm products. He responded that that was getting into something different, like farmers markets, and that he's a *different kind of farmer; we're just tobacco farmers*, he told me. This farmer clearly sees two categories of farmers: tobacco farmers and non-tobacco farmers, suggesting separate categories.

In the last chapter, I discussed the category "tobacco man" and the category-bound activities associated with it: the performance of a particular masculinity that involves a relationship with the crop and a master level of knowledge of raising it. The performance of masculinity at the level of cutting, tending your fields, preparing your crop for market and so on is only one level of performance. There is also performance at

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<sup>207</sup> Both of these spaces, as well as other male agricultural spaces, are also white spaces. Black farmers that I interviewed told me stories of experiences of racism—as long ago as following WWII and as recently as a few months prior to our interview—in these white spaces, particularly experiences of being denied access to products and equipment as well as to loans and services. All of the Burley Co-op directors are white; I was unable to confirm the race of all Partnership board members, but most if not all are white.

<sup>208</sup> See Nan Johnson on the enforcement of the boundaries of gendered rhetorical spaces as one of the ways in which gender roles were reinscribed through gendered performances in the decades following the Civil War, as women were called back into the home after having begun to enter more public spaces. Considering specific rhetorical practices in terms of the performance of white middle class femininity outside of academic settings—letter writing, parlor rhetoric, and the oratory practices and writings of women reformers—she argues that in each realm conservative gender expectations were reinscribed even when it appeared that promises of equal access to rhetorical skill were being made. Here, too, gendered spaces serve to reinscribe gender inequalities.

a larger scale: decisions about what crops to grow; herein lies a central symbolic valuing of tobacco production. “Diversifying” means moving yourself out of this category, requiring a new performed identity in addition to new knowledge, skills, equipment, and so on. This new performed identity must replace the traditionalized performance of masculinity of fathers and grandfathers, the models of the “golden age” of the *tobacco man* masculinity described in the last chapter.

Although not always articulated overtly, gender has become mapped onto crops. Tobacco farmers are performing a traditionalized masculinity as they choose to continue to raise a crop that has been gendered male, tobacco, versus moving to crops that symbolize the feminine household sphere. Vegetables and flowers are aligned with the household, and grown in “gardens”—as opposed to “fields” in which “farmers” work—which have most often been tended by women as they supply food for the family (sustenance) and, in times of surplus, have sold it for (extra) income. The gendering of crops has long been acknowledged in the literature on gender and development, and has served as a basis for agricultural policy-making in “developing” countries. Often, an understanding of emic conceptions of “women’s crops” and “men’s crops” has been a means used to address women’s vulnerabilities in such contexts.<sup>209</sup> Here, I think it can be useful for understanding both the important role that women are playing and the complications of “replacing” tobacco.

In the late 1990s, a group of sociologists conducted a study of the sustainable agriculture movement in Iowa, and in part, considered the role of masculine ideologies in the movement from conventional to sustainable agriculture. They concluded that “the

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<sup>209</sup> Also see Doss and Carr for critiques of the practical application, despite acknowledged cultural constructions, of “men’s crops” and “women’s crops.”

conventional masculinity of most male farmers hinders the transition from industrial to sustainable agriculture. Moreover, the success of the sustainable agriculture movement depends, in part, on providing a social arena in which men may discover and perform different masculinities” (Peter et al. 216).<sup>210</sup> While, once again, these researchers are not looking at specific crops, their distinction between the performed masculine identities of sustainable versus industrial farmers is helpful in thinking about the move that tobacco farmers are being asked to make, from traditional to diversified farming.<sup>211</sup>

I was told many times over the course of my fieldwork that men are less willing than women to change or to try new things. For instance, during one of our interviews, Mike Carter and I discussed the lack of involvement of women in tobacco production in his region, and he then told me:

Mike: Now, when they switch to vegetables more typically you would see both spouses involved in it. Sometimes with the lady taking a lead.

Ann: Why do you think that is?

Mike: ...Not sure that a female farmer's not, more prone or more apt to try different enterprises than her male counterpart.

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<sup>210</sup> Peter et al. compare the masculine ideologies of two groups of men, those who were members of a sustainable agriculture organization, Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), and others who were not members. They argue that non-PFI men adhere to a monologic masculinity and are less likely to move to sustainable agriculture (in fact that monologic masculinity holds them back from it), while PFI men adhere to a dialogic masculinity that allows for more flexibility in the performance of a masculine identity. In distinguishing between “monologic” and “dialogic” masculinities, they rely on Mikhail Bakhtin, combined with the work of Judith Butler, Erving Goffman, and Michael Kimmel, in terms of the performance of these ideologies of masculinity. This study is particularly interesting to me because based on their description, the Practical Farmers of Iowa is similar to the Partnership for Family Farms organization in Kentucky that I have just mentioned, an organization that may also provide an arena for more flexible gendered performances.

<sup>211</sup> In public discourses surrounding the “locavore” and organic movements, “traditional” farming is often aligned with sustainable and organic farming through calls to return to such farming practices. However, it is important to note that what is commonly referred to in the agriculture literature as “conventional” farming—highly mechanized, chemical dependent, etc. farming—has become traditionalized over the period of the twentieth century. What this means is that for present day farmers, “conventional” farming can be viewed as more “traditional” than organic or sustainable farming (hence the label “conventional”). My use of “traditional” farming, therefore, refers to conventional practices rather than organic practices which are of course “older.”

Ann: More willing to try something new?

Mike: Yeah. You know I mean they are, farmers. The male gender it seems to me gets more comfortable in what he's used to than what, a female farmer or maybe the female gender as a rule, would, wouldn't be in that same comfort level, she would be more interested in trying something different... (8/23/07)

Similarly, I asked Alice Baesler whether she thought that women bring a particular perspective to farming and she replied, "I think so- I think sometimes, you might get hung up on the big picture of what you're trying to do. And sometimes women can come up with, with a idea that just might work, that's just a little different." Women also made comments to me about their tobacco farming husbands, that "that's all they know," suggesting their belief that these farmers would not be willing to learn new crops. Susan Harkins told me, "I think that a lot of women just by virtue of being women who appear and seem to be much more nurturing, they do have a different approach to agriculture."

That the idea that women are more willing than men to change is so readily articulated, suggests that it is a gendered ideal that has become traditionalized and even naturalized. The result, in terms of the performance of masculinity, is that men then perform stubbornness, resistance to change. Tobacco farmers commonly point out that when a farmer sees that a new technology works well, is accessible and affordable, and will improve his tobacco income he very likely will adopt it. They describe themselves this way, and also tell stories about fathers/grandfathers centered on the idea that "he had to be shown it worked," and then he accepted it (as Crain and Long do in the quotes above). By telling such narratives about tobacco men of an earlier age, a fluid golden age, they allow themselves to accept change within tobacco traditions, while performing



a traditionalized ideal of masculinity that is conflated with stubbornness. Moving to alternative crops, however, is for many a step outside the tobacco man ideal, outside of their farming traditions. In this sense, like the non-PFI farmers in the study by Peter et al., a particular performed masculinity (along with tangible aspects of tradition such as land, equipment, and other economic concerns) might be understood as one factor holding these farmers back from replacing tobacco.

The stories of Evans Orchard and of the challenges faced by tobacco farmers suggest further evidence that the tradition/innovation binary is problematic, as tobacco farmers—“traditional” farmers—are often described as innovative, even as “diversified” farmers (those categorized as “innovative” based on the dominant discourses) are often building on gendered traditions as well. *Both* tradition and innovation are central to *both* tobacco and diversified farming. Yet it is “innovation” that continues to be valued in public discourses. It is for this reason that tobacco farming is categorized as traditional and diversified as innovative, even though neither fits neatly into one category.

As I have suggested, understanding tradition and innovation as binary oppositions is problematic. So, too, is such an understanding of traditional and diversified farmers. In many cases they are quite distinct categories, as I have suggested. But of course there are exceptions, farmers that combine the two approaches. Shell Farms in Garrard County is one such example. In addition to about 115 acres of tobacco, the three generations of Shell men mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation also raise about three hundred acres of tobacco plants for sale to other farmers, they usually have about 800 head of cattle, and

they have multiple greenhouses of hanging plants and other annual flowers and vegetables that they sell both out of the greenhouse and on a wholesale basis to area nurseries. The eldest Mr. Shell once swore they'd never grow flowers and is uninterested in this part of their operation; it his son who led them into horticulture. While this seems to suggest a generational story, the youngest Shell tells me he's willing to work any part of the farm that needs it, but if he has a choice it's the tobacco he chooses.

All of this suggests attempts to rhetorically re-categorize what was once women's work as "diversification" and therefore innovation rather than tradition. As I pointed out above, in order to sell diversification as the future of farming it must be regendered or ungendered, and I think that the professionalization of diversification, and the availability of grant funding, in itself attempts to do this. Yet, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture's marketing campaigns for Kentucky Proud might be viewed as a more overt attempt to masculinize diversification—including vegetable, flower, and other alternative crop production and "value-added" products such as salsa, cheese, and baked goods. The KDA website once again provides an important point of analysis.

As was apparent in my discussion of KDA newsletters, the Commissioner of Agriculture, an elected official, has long been a very public position. It is therefore no surprise that the current commissioner, Richie Farmer, has provided the public face for the Department's most public program, Kentucky Proud (his role in promoting Kentucky Proud has *replaced* the role of past Commissioners as promoters of tobacco). The KDA website, as well as the newsletter and other publications, frequently features images of Farmer making statements about the program. However, further background information on Farmer is important to mention here (the irony of his last name aside). Farmer was

elected to the position of Commissioner of Agriculture in 2003. Prior to the election, his claim to fame stemmed from his days as a University of Kentucky basketball player; between 1989 and '92 he was part of a group of particularly skilled players that became known as the "Unforgettables." His political campaigns, particularly the first one, have relied heavily on his basketball history.

In his second term as commissioner, he unveiled a new ad campaign for Kentucky Proud, featuring himself and his former "Unforgettable" teammates towering over images of Kentucky food products (fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and beef). The words "Unforgettable Flavor. Unforgettable Freshness. Unforgettable Quality." line the bottom of the ad. When I first saw the ad, I frankly brushed it off as an expression of the Commissioner's ego, wondering what basketball had to do with Kentucky agriculture, other than Farmer's apparent need to continue to remind his constituents of his UK basketball history even after he was elected. I've since realized that this ad also serves as a means of shifting the image of "new" kinds of farming.

At one time, the homepage of the KDA website included this image of Farmer and his former teammates, towering over Kentucky products, with a link to the Kentucky Proud page. The link led to a page (still available on the site) through which users can locate producers and products (Kentucky Proud). This page has three images, two of which are changing images, and the third (again, the image of Farmer and the Unforgettables) is a static image. The image on the right provides a link to a searchable database of products, and the revolving images include cheese, packages of muffin mix, and a platter of prepared foods including what appears to be country ham. On the left are images that provide a link to a database of producers, and the revolving images include: a

white man standing in front grape vines, two white men in a greenhouse with a bouquet of flowers, and an African American man and woman with hanging pots of flowers. All appear to be in their 50s or 60s. The combination of these images suggests an attempt to change the face of flower and vegetable production to a male face. They argue that this is not your grandmother's garden.<sup>212</sup>

Not only is this not your grandmother's garden, according to dominant rhetorics of transition and diversification, Kentucky's new agricultural landscape has replaced your grandfather's farm. The Evans farm, representing the model of the dominant discourse of diversification, is one to which children and families can proudly be invited—unlike a tobacco farm. Here, is where the stigma that is associated with the crop and those who grow it come together; here, and in the making of policy. The symbolic value of tobacco has been tarnished through stigma—and the state of Kentucky is clearly interested in presenting a new, cleaner, face to the nation—and the economic value of tobacco has been erased by “heritage” discourses that have moved it into the past. This has numerous implications for tobacco farmers, not the least of which is the fact that if the tobacco market does continue to decline there are over 8100 farmers whose voices are not being heard in public discourses.

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<sup>212</sup> In contrast, the North Carolina Cooperative Extension website for “Value-Added and Alternative Agriculture” features “The Produce Lady,” who provides harvesting and safety tips, history, and recipes to farmers about particular vegetables. “If you’re a farmer that sells your products at a local market, how do you respond when a customer asks you how to prepare a certain food item? If your response is, ‘I don’t know, I just grow it!’ then The Produce Lady can help you.” The implication seems to be that farmers, particularly male farmers, are raising unfamiliar crops and the advice of a woman is needed in order to provide customers with the motivation to buy. According to a note at the bottom of the website, “A grant from the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission supports the development of this Web site.” (“Farmers Markets/The Produce Lady”)

## CONCLUSION

Although I began my research in 2005, the first year following the federal tobacco buyout, the major period of my research did not begin until the 2007 crop year. I remember feeling, in 2005 and 2006, that I was missing so much by not being able to spend more time “in the field,” during what I assumed was the period of transition in which farmers were dealing with the end of the federal tobacco program—either exiting tobacco production or entering the “Brave New World” (Bickers) of Kentucky burley with no quotas and no support price. The first year after the buyout was a period of great uncertainty, and I was repeatedly told that “we’ll see what happens”—and I wanted to see what was happening. As I write in 2009, it is still happening. The contracts offered to growers in 2009 raised new fears about the future, and the vast amount of uncertainty that remains confirms that the transition period for tobacco production in Kentucky and elsewhere is ongoing.

Tobacco economist Will Snell told a House subcommittee in March 2009:

While favorable conditions occurred during the early post-buyout era, the tobacco economy has changed dramatically in recent months. Global needs for U.S. burley tobacco are being adversely impacted by an increasing value of the U.S. dollar, a global economic downturn, and increasing foreign supplies of lower quality tobacco. Domestically, tax increases, smoking restrictions, health issues, shifts to smokeless tobacco products, increasing availability of imports, movement of cigarette production overseas, and possibly anticipated FDA regulation are reducing domestic needs for U.S. burley. (Snell “Testimony”)

In hindsight, it may be that 2007, despite the drought, was one of the most stable years since the buyout. In 2008, contract prices were up a couple of cents above those of 2007, but incentives (additional pennies per pound for meeting the contracted poundage) were down about the same amount, so that in actuality prices remained the same. The 2009 contracts include prices that are slightly higher, but incentives are not being offered. In addition, and even more telling (and scary), Philip Morris has begun to cut contracts. As it was explained to me by a grower in April 2009, Philip Morris has instituted a “tier” system based on growers’ “performance”: their history of making their poundage and of crop quality.<sup>213</sup> Growers in the bottom tier were offered contracts with fewer pounds or not offered contracts at all, and those at the top were offered the same number of pounds or more. This farmer expressed the belief that Philip Morris is “weeding out” the worst farmers, and he also told me that he was “seeing more ground plowed” in the spring of 2009, as some farmers come back to tobacco because of a weakening cattle market and because growing corn for ethanol has not been as lucrative as was predicted. Because they cannot get contracts without a recent history, these returning burley growers planted their crops with hopes of selling at the remaining warehouses or through the Burley Co-op. This is not a surprising turn of events; times of crisis and uncertainty often lead to a return to tradition—these farmers have the knowledge, land, and equipment to raise tobacco.

In March 2009, Will Snell issued comments to the county agents (and posted them on the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture website) in which he noted that his “analysis indicates that we have quickly moved from a period of excess demand

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<sup>213</sup> Philip Morris’ use of “performance” as a basis for contracts is fascinating, though beyond the scope of my current research.

for U.S. burley to a more balanced supply/demand scenario or possibly an oversupply situation,” and he echoed the observations of the farmer with whom I spoke:

In response to this changing scenario, some U.S. tobacco buyers have been reassessing their buying strategies during the past few weeks. The companies are also evaluating the past performance (in terms of percentage of contract pounds/number of grades delivered, and chemistry/quality of leaf) of each contract grower to determine future leaf-growing opportunities.

With this all this said (*sic*), I am not trying to cast a totally negative outlook for burley tobacco for 2009 and beyond. I still think quality growers with decent yields and a well-defined marketing plan can survive well in this environment. Some of the better growers may actually see production opportunities expand as the companies shift around contract pounds. Some may remain near last year levels, while others will see their cont[r]act levels reduced. And some who did not follow contract requirements or produced inferior tobacco may not be given an opportunity to renew their contracts. (Snell “Comments”)

In a 2008 article, Peter Benson described the situation for North Carolina flue-cured farmers contracting with Philip Morris, including the rigid rules enforced at the time of sale, and farmers’ opinions that “contracting is about culling, like when you pick rotten apples from a bushel” (366). Although, as Snell argues, the current supply and demand situation may be the reason that contracts and incentives are being cut, Benson’s account suggests that supply and demand aside, Philip Morris is indeed weeding out the growers that they do not want to work with, increasing contracts for growers that they do, and generally letting the growers know who holds the power in the post-buyout era. Burley growers would do well to keep an eye on the situation for flue-cured growers in order to see what may come next to the burley region.

Philip Morris is by far the most powerful burley tobacco buyer, and the company is increasingly exercising this power over growers. The “failed diversification”

narratives that I described in the last chapter appear to indeed provide lessons for today's tobacco farmers, and the fears that were being expressed in interviews conducted in 2000, as direct contracting was first beginning, appear to have been well-founded. The upcoming sales season, for these farmers, may turn out much like the experiences of those who raised bell peppers and were left with no market. Philip Morris seems to not only be gradually weeding out the growers that do not meet their standards, but also keeping select growers active by consistently providing contract prices that just barely make it possible for some, but not all, growers to make a profit, and they are becoming increasingly involved in on-farm practices in order to ensure that they get the types of tobacco they want.

In addition, the tobacco industry has once again been in the news, as I finalize this dissertation: FDA regulation of tobacco products finally became a reality with the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, signed by President Barack Obama on June 22, 2009. Although the legislation bars the Food and Drug Administration from regulating growers, the regulation of the content of tobacco products will certainly lead to more intense regulation of growers by manufacturers, such as limits on the use of MH-30 and other chemicals (already an issue, particularly in the flue-cured region but also in burley). Although growers have long opposed FDA regulation, some now express hope that it will increase the amount of domestic tobacco purchased by manufacturers because “[f]oreign leaf [used in domestic manufacturing of products] will have to meet the same standards for pesticides as domestic leaf” (Henton). Whatever tobacco farmers’ feelings may be, FDA regulation adds another layer of uncertainty about tobacco’s future and the ongoing transition of the tobacco growing tradition.



As I have argued, the story of tobacco is structured as a narrative of change, and so while I have carved out a particular period of transition, tobacco culture should be viewed as having always been in transition, from the time that inhabitants of the Americas first “came across [the plant] about 18,000 years ago,” to the beginning of cultivation of the plant sometime between 5000 and 3000 B.C.E (Gately 3), to John Rolfe’s first attempt to plant tobacco at Jamestown in 1612, through the establishment of an American farming tradition stretching from colonial times to today.

This dissertation has not been a call for “preservation” of tradition or even for “cultural conservation”—a term that came into favor in the 1980s as “an alternative to *preservation*” because “*conservation* registers the dynamism of cultural resources, implying that, like natural phenomena, cultural phenomena inevitably change” (Hufford Introduction 3 *emphases hers*). As I said in the Introduction, I hope that, through this project, I have demonstrated that “there’s hands that touch this stuff, and that there’s lives that are dependent on it.” But, I have not set out to argue that we must either preserve or conserve the tobacco “way of life” or the cultural value of the category “tobacco man.” In some ways this makes this dissertation very different from other folklore projects, as we have tended to focus on those “traditions” that we deem worthy of celebrating and conserving. David Whisnant, for instance, has argued, “To call something traditional has been to say it is good—worthy of filming, recording, writing a book about, archiving, or putting on a stage or an exhibit. Of course we recognize that there are bad traditions. So when we say *tradition* we implicitly mean *good* traditions, but even that understood correction is not sufficient” (186 *emphasis his*).

My objective in this dissertation has been to examine the implications for tobacco farming families of the changing contexts of this traditional occupation and “way of life,” through the unraveling of various rhetorical discourses as they are deployed in different contexts and with different agendas. However, this case study has implications that reach far beyond tobacco farming families. According to Eric Ramírez-Ferrero, writing in the aftermath of the “farm crisis” of the 80s and 90s, “American agriculture is in a period of transition” (120); in this sense then, tobacco farmers are not alone. Since the period of Ramírez-Ferrero’s research, larger dialogues about agriculture, particularly critiques of industrial agriculture, have been on the rise. The public discourses surrounding tobacco, through contradictory messages, reflect the transitions in American agriculture more generally, as some argue that only farmers willing to continually enlarge their operations will survive (reflecting a belief in the system of industrial agriculture that began in the early twentieth century), and others critique “industrial” agriculture in favor of smaller, more diverse farms. Sustainable agriculture advocates hope that American agriculture is on the precipice of real change, as consumers increasingly question not only the disappearance of small farms in their locales, but also the use of petroleum products in moving farm products around the world, the application of chemicals that are injurious to the environment and to consumers, and the dangers of not knowing where their food comes from, as consumer scares about spinach, jalapeño peppers, green onions, and other vegetables tainted with E. coli and other bacteria sweep the nation.

In order for this movement to be successful, however, the challenges faced by farmers who have long depended on a single crop must be more fully understood. Such farmers now farm in the ways that they do as a direct result of adhering to the “new

agriculture” that developed early in the twentieth century, leading to increased dependence on monocrop farming (although, as I have described, tobacco farmers are usually also cattle farmers). As I have argued, it is not as simple as telling farmers to “grow something else” that will replace tobacco (or other traditional farm products in other regions); certainly it is not as simple as telling tobacco farmers to grow vegetables for local people. As farmers consider their futures, they must grapple with issues of tradition, heritage, nostalgia, and traditionalized gendered performances of identity.

In order to understand this current period of transition, I have examined particular historical moments, including significant changes in farm technology, the economy, and the growing awareness of the health effects of tobacco use. But in addition to a chronology of what happened in the history of the tobacco farm, I have also gathered a retrospective history, an accounting of how people today view their past. Farmers value the skills passed down through generations, as well as between farmers of the same generation. The mastery of particular skills is crucial at every stage of production: from preparing the ground; to knowing when to set, top, cut, and house, and when tobacco is in case and ready to strip; to packaging cured tobacco for the market in particular ways that ensure a pretty crop that will bring a high price. It is this mastery that farmers are referring to when they call tobacco farming a tradition, but they are also referring to having the specialized equipment, structures, and land required in order to carry out these practices. Tobacco farming can be understood as a “way of life” in part because the cycle of production is unique. This “13-month crop” requires the farmer’s involvement in the crop year-round, as the rhythm of the daily life of the farmer always involves either working in the current crop or preparing for the next year’s crop, and often both at the

same time. I often heard the refrain, “no two years are the same.” A mastery of tobacco man skill centers on the ability not just to engage in the same practices year after year, but the ability to anticipate and adapt to changing circumstances of weather, technology, and markets. Such changes are understood as part of the tradition of raising tobacco.

As I have argued, however, other kinds of changes are understood as *not* a part of the tradition; these are changes that involve a move to other crops, requiring new kinds of knowledge, skills, equipment, land, and identities. This also raises questions about whether, as farmers’ relationships with tobacco continue to change—as they grow ever-increasing acreages and touch the crop less and less—there will be a point at which tradition is understood as in complete decline or even as having ended.

Vernacular expressions of tobacco farming as heritage claim this tradition as part of regional and family heritage, while also arguing that tobacco continues to be of economic importance in the present. Nostalgia for the tobacco farm is less about better ways of handling the crop in the past and more about the changing economy (as demand for domestic tobaccos wane and stigma grows). In other words, nostalgia is tied to the changing economy. I have argued that the larger sense of loss expressed by tobacco farmers is for a golden age in which both tobacco and the tobacco man were respected; in this fluid age the performance of a particular masculinity based on a mastery of traditional skills was highly valued in large part because the work was understood as central to the region’s economy. Being a tobacco farmer isn’t equivalent, in terms of social status, monetary gain, or practices of masculinity, to being a bell pepper farmer. While it can be argued that some of the alternatives to tobacco that are currently being promoted have symbolic values with connections to identities and “ways of life”—such

as developing vineyards or organic vegetable operations—they are so different from the performances and practices of the tobacco farmer that they do not offer a true substitution. Instead they require a paradigm shift.

Ultimately, of course, farmers must grapple with how best to ensure their economic futures. As I have noted, there are important economic reasons behind farmers' understanding of change as part of *the tradition* of tobacco production: farmers must accept changing practices that lead to more efficient ways of doing things and that therefore benefit them economically. While this statement may seem obvious, folklorists have all too often failed to fully take economics into account; I argue here that we must examine not only the symbolic values of the cultural practices that we choose to study, but the economic values of such practices in the lives of those who practice them. In the case of tobacco, issues of identity—seemingly symbolic—are intricately tied up with issues of economics. Performing *tobacco man* once brought respect, as it meant performing specific cultural practices with *pride*, and it meant getting paid for it.

My initial understanding of “pride” as purely symbolic came directly from our interest, as folklorists, in the aesthetic expressions of daily life; we strive to document, present, and preserve artistic expression all around us, those expressions that often go unnoticed. In 1972, Dan Ben-Amos famously defined folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” (Toward a Definition 13), and despite ongoing disagreements over the definition(s) of the term, *art* remains central, in practice, to our work. The editors of a 1995 special issue of the Journal of American Folklore included “art” among the “Keywords for the Study of Expressive Culture,” along with tradition, text, group, performance, genre, and context. Gerald Pocius wrote in his discussion of the

term that, “[Folklorists] have concentrated on artistic products and activities of culture” (413). Occupational studies by folklorists have often “demonstrate[d] the existence of the aesthetic impulse in the workplace” (Jones 176), as though the impulse to create art is always separate from the very real need to make a living. Tying a “pretty” hand of tobacco is certainly recognized by folklorists in tobacco regions as a prime example of art in everyday life; it appears to be an example of how occupational knowledge is not just about how to get the job done but about how to add those extra flourishes that may not be necessary, but satisfy our needs, as people, to make art. It was this framing of tying a hand of tobacco that led me to expect nostalgia for the loss of this cultural practice—a practice that is described as an *art* by both insiders and outsiders—followed by judgments about baling tobacco. Not only did I discover that the aesthetic system moved with the means of packaging tobacco, but I learned that the presentation of tobacco has both economic and symbolic meanings.

The move from hands to bales does indeed have important symbolic meanings; a pretty hand of tobacco is now symbolic of a time, perceived as mostly gone, when farmers were respected for the product they produced. That respect, however, was not merely about an “aesthetic impulse in the workplace,” but about the possibility that the prettier the hand (and now the bale), the more money that tobacco would bring. The stigma that farmers now face, in place of respect, is equally tied to a loss of income. Tobacco can no longer buy a farm; tobacco farming is not only a stigmatized way of life, it is a stigmatized occupation.

Farmers’ acceptance of change within the tobacco tradition is just one important discovery I made early in my research. Once I began my fieldwork with farmers, I

realized that several of my assumptions were not being born out, which in turn led me to an examination of the discrepancies between public discourses about Kentucky burley production and the discourses of farmers with whom I interacted throughout my fieldwork. What I have offered here are my interpretations of examples I collected of both types of discourse, both separately and together, including the ways in which they contradict, align, reinterpret, and talk back to one another. The contradictions that I have described in the various tobacco-related discourses can largely be traced to the changing symbolism of the crop and those who grow it.

I set out to do ethnographic fieldwork with tobacco farmers, and I quickly realized that in order to understand the larger picture of tobacco production in Kentucky, I needed to utilize a number of additional methodological tools. I needed to read tobacco and agriculture history in order to understand the historical context of raising tobacco; tobacco farming has long been a source of fascination for outsiders, both because of the unique practices involved in raising it and because of the immediate interest in this new substance, as Europeans began to both use it and profit from it. I also needed to understand how the story of tobacco has been emplotted by other writers and how it is told retrospectively by farmers themselves. My historical research taught me both about the consistencies—such as the use of terms that describe specific practices, like *setting* and *topping*—and about the changing contexts of tobacco production as attitudes toward tobacco products changed. Historical research was also necessary in order to contextualize—and understand the value of—the roles of women on farms, past and present. Women have always played central roles in the production of tobacco, and they have had the primary responsibility for other farm activities and for the generation of

particular kinds of farm income, however unacknowledged. Historical research helped me to understand both continuity and change in women's roles, as women take leading roles in situations in which tobacco production is indeed being "replaced." This understanding was also strengthened through my review of the literature on gender and alternative and sustainable agriculture by rural sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and others.

In addition to understanding how the history of tobacco production has been emplotted by historians and is presented retrospectively by farmers, archival research enabled me to look at how what is now "history" was interpreted and presented as it was happening. I chose to analyze the newsletters of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, a newsletter published over the lifetimes of many of the farmers with whom I worked, as a particular rhetorical site through which I could trace the changing meanings of the crop and those who grow it. Here and elsewhere, my training in rhetoric was central, helping me to understand multiple discourses and the many forms that persuasion takes. An understanding of material culture studies was necessary as well; however, I did not set out to measure barns and catalog tools. Instead, I learned about the material culture of tobacco production as farmers taught me about the uses and meanings of structures, tools, machinery, and technological innovations.<sup>214</sup> It was also necessary for me to delve into the work of economists and into data provided by state and federal agricultural agencies as well as the Census of Agriculture.

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<sup>214</sup> See Michael Ann Williams, Homeplace: The Social Use and Meanings of the Folk Dwelling in Southwestern North Carolina, in which she argues that conventional approaches to vernacular architecture have ignored the uses of structures (including gendered uses) and focused instead only on the structures themselves.



Here lies the value of our work as ethnographers and, more broadly, the perspective of the humanities: the bringing together of data, theory, and methodologies from across multiple fields of inquiry. I entered my fieldwork with questions rather than with a hypothesis to be tested, allowing me to formulate, test, challenge, and constantly shape my ideas and methodologies through a process of dialogue in the field and a reflexive awareness of my own assumptions, ideas, theories, and responses to the many types of data that I was gathering. While much has been said about the discipline of folklore's "lack of theory"—that we instead constantly borrow theory from other fields—perhaps our ability to not only be interdisciplinary but also to bring together the tools of multiple disciplines should be understood as part of what is most valuable about what we offer. While an economist, for instance, can understand that tobacco cannot be "replaced" in pure economic terms because Kentucky farmers have small hilly farms and lack knowledge about marketing their farm products, my argument about the symbolic meanings of tobacco suggests that even if such questions of economy were solved with the waiving of a magical wand, there would still be a problem. Bell peppers, even with a lucrative and consistent market, cannot simply "replace" tobacco. I needed to understand the economic data in order to understand this; in turn, my interpretations are useful for developing economic policy that will benefit farmers because I provide qualitative data about the complexities of the multiple challenges that farmers face—both economic and symbolic—in a way that numbers alone simply cannot.

Farmers make choices about what crops to grow for a number of reasons, including reasons that, although perhaps unarticulated, are tied up with traditionalized gendered meanings. Because crops such as vegetables and flowers grown for local

consumption have traditionally been raised primarily by women, such crops are understood to be “women’s crops.” Similarly, tobacco is understood to be a man’s crop. Tobacco cannot be replaced by bell peppers in part because in local understandings raising tobacco is commensurate with the performance of a particular masculinity, one that once meant respect because it was valued both economically and symbolically. I have argued that although tobacco production once depended on the labor of the entire family, it is understood as a crop under male control. More than ever perhaps, it is a crop produced primarily—but not exclusively, as I have noted—by men as women work off-farm jobs or diversify their farm operations. The cultural practices involved in the production of tobacco, when done with “pride,” add up to the performance of a particular traditionalized masculinity, that of the *tobacco man*. The changing symbolism of the crop combines with changing cultural practices to create nostalgia for not only past ways of production but for performed identities that are understood to be in decline or even to no longer exist, because the performance of the mastery of particular skills—those of their fathers, grandfathers, and perhaps their younger selves—is no longer necessary. They do not want to go back to the work of those days because it would be economically unfeasible; instead, tobacco farmers express nostalgia for a time when tobacco was treated with respect by tobacco men, who themselves were treated with respect in their communities and who had a great deal of social and economic power. Rather than understand this as a “crisis” of masculinity, however, I have attempted to understand how the changing meanings of performed masculinity are expressed, and how outside forces are working to re-shape what it means to be a man.

Diversification efforts have failed to take into account that by asking farmers to diversify, they are asking farmers to not only abandon tradition (which is understood by farmers to encompass both knowledge and tangible resources such as equipment and land), but to abandon a particular performed masculinity built on the mastery of particular skills. These efforts are motivated in part by the changed symbolism; the state has an interest in creating a new narrative about Kentucky agriculture that is based on healthy farm products rather than tobacco. Such efforts are also gendered, as they depend on professionalizing what was once considered “women’s work”: vegetables, flowers, and value-added products. While women have often led the way in diversifying family farms, their current roles—like their historical roles—have gone largely unacknowledged. As tobacco farmers are asked to engage in vegetable and flower production, women’s work continues to be devalued.

The significance of such an approach to understanding gender reaches far beyond tobacco, and is particularly relevant in light of the recent economic recession, widely discussed in the media as a gendered recession, one in which the “unemployment gap” favors women, and gender roles are being reversed as women become the primary breadwinners and the number of stay-at-home dads rises (cf. Harris, Coombes, Rampbell). How can the experiences of tobacco men help to shed light on the experiences, for instance, of male autoworkers in Detroit? Simply lamenting a crisis of masculinity will not further our understanding of gender, nor will it help either women or men as they struggle with cultural and economic changes that have very real consequences not only in theory but in daily life. “Crisis” rhetoric will not lead to the

development of public understandings or policies that adequately address cultural changes that are occurring—whether in Detroit auto plants or on Kentucky farms.

What was once a category of respect is now clouded in stigma; farmers variously both manage and resist this stigmatization. Expressions of resistance to the changing status of the crop and the category of tobacco man often take the form of what I have called “rhetorics of defense.” These are the unimpeached discourses<sup>215</sup>: “It’s a legal crop,” “I’m not telling anybody to smoke,” “Tobacco pays my bills,” “Tobacco is part of our heritage.” These are the arguments that farmers are left with as they defend themselves—to others and to themselves—because they are thus far unimpeached. Farmers demonstrate their rhetorical skill at locating and utilizing the remaining available means of persuasion, those that still hold rhetorical power. This does not preclude the possibility that even these discourses may some day be impeached, and farmers express an understanding of this as well; “It’s a legal crop,” for instance, also expresses the fear that tobacco will be outlawed (and therefore the discourse impeached). Farmers cannot argue that it is moral to raise tobacco; because the morality argument has been impeached, they must argue that it is still *legal*. Because they can no longer argue that the links between use and disease are uncertain or unproven, they must argue that use is a *choice*. Although tobacco can no longer buy a farm, perhaps the only unimpeachable discourse is that not only does “tobacco pay my bills,” but it has put shoes on the children and provided them with an education.

In the history of tobacco production, there have been numerous opportunities for stigma to become a threat to tobacco heritage. The association of tobacco with slavery

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<sup>215</sup> My thanks to Nan Johnson for suggesting the term “unimpeached discourses” in regard to this work.

was one such opportunity, and Kentucky has dealt with this threat through the creation of a narrative of Kentucky as a border state, one in which there were few slaves—unlike the cotton belt in which the crop is not stigmatized but the historical means of production is.<sup>216</sup> The early twentieth century “tobacco wars” provided another point at which tobacco might have been threatened by stigma, much like the violent efforts to unionize coal miners became part of the narrative of stigma surrounding the coal industry. Instead, the tobacco wars are remembered with a degree of pride, as an era in which tobacco farmers fought back against the companies (even as they fought one another, burned one another’s barns, and destroyed one another’s crops). The communal memory of this period has been collapsed so that the creation of the federal tobacco program is understood as a successful result of the tobacco wars, when in fact the program came out of the New Deal thirty years later.

The final threat to tobacco, the one that has resulted in what appears to be a lasting stigmatization of farmers, is the health effects of use; the release of the Surgeon General’s report on the dangers of smoking in 1964 is widely recognized as the major turning point. I was initially frustrated in my attempts to ask farmers “the right question” about the effects on them of stigma. Whether they smoked or not, they answered my questions about the changed meanings of tobacco with negative comments about such things as smoking bans in restaurants and other public places. I came to realize that such

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<sup>216</sup> This is unique to Kentucky, and is less the case in tobacco-producing regions such as the Carolinas, in which colonial plantations served as the impetus for the beginnings of American dependence on slave labor. In the larger American narrative of tobacco history, slavery in fact is a piece of the stigma of tobacco—so much so that an article that I submitted for consideration for publication in another field, in which I discussed the present-day rhetorics of diversification, was rejected in part because I did not include a discussion of slavery.

responses were important demonstrations of the inseparability of production and use, the farmer and the smoker, the way of life and the industry.

I have argued that the state and tobacco manufacturers responded to the threat posed by the growing awareness of the health effects of tobacco use, beginning in the 1950s, with the deployment of heritage discourses, and that while such discourses failed to recover tobacco they have been co-opted by farmers as a means of defending continued production. Heritage discourses are ultimately defensive discourses; “heritage” is a means of dealing with threats to cultural practices. By calling attention to the tobacco farming way of life as central to the industry, this attempt to deflect blame led to an extension of tobacco stigma from the industry and the products to farmers. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, heritage “depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves” (“Sounds” 7). Like the heritage efforts critiqued by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and other scholars, efforts by the state and the industry to promote “tobacco heritage” resulted in a public understanding that the economic importance of tobacco was in the past. The deployment of tobacco heritage, however, took place as tobacco production continued. Many Kentucky farmers continue to raise tobacco, and many have co-opted institutional heritage discourses in order to put them to new uses, arguing that tobacco is their heritage *and* that it continues to feed their families. In order to understand the deployment of heritage discourses by farmers, it is necessary to define “heritage” more widely than have Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and other scholars. As farmers use it they are also reclaiming prior meanings of the term—they are not concerned with our own misuses of “heritage” as we create museums, heritage trails, and heritage parks. “Heritage” is used to refer to how they came to be

who they are and do what they do through that which they have inherited: their history, their traditions, their very identity.

I argue that heritage discourses, more generally, result from perceptions of threat. In this particular case, stigma, as well as the health and moral implications that precipitated stigma, poses a unique threat. By the 1970s, the continued economic importance of tobacco was threatened by the growth of tobacco production in other parts of the world; at the same time it was becoming increasingly difficult to deny the health effects of smoking. Institutional heritage discourses were deployed by the state and the industry because a heritage-based argument seemed, unlike these prior defenses, to be unimpeachable. Institutional heritage discourses were largely abandoned by the turn of the twenty-first century, and the state instead began to promote discourses of diversification: “this who we are *now*.” Tobacco production, despite the rhetorical erasure from the landscape and public awareness, continues under a cloak of invisibility.

As I drove the back roads of the burley region of Kentucky throughout the harvest season of 2007, passing field after field of tobacco in various stages of cutting and housing, I thought about the many times I have heard comments about the changing landscape as a result of the disappearance of tobacco. As if he’s had similar thoughts, when I asked county agent Dan Grigson what he thought the level of public awareness was in terms of the amount of tobacco being raised, he said:

I think many people feel like tobacco is, is gone. You know, it’s not around here anymore, you know. If they’d be out in the country and drive around a little bit

they still wouldn't see lots of acres of tobacco, 'cause most of your tobacco is back off the road. I mean they'll see some driving down the highways, but I don't think the general public has any realization, that the amount of tobacco is still being grown here.

Despite the rhetorical recategorizations of tobacco in public discourses, tobacco farmers are still here. How long they will be here remains to be seen.



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