

CHAPTER 6—TOBACCO

Will Ashton, Burley grower.



Fewer acres, more production.

Still lower on the economic scale is Will Ashton. He has a small farm in the Highland Rim area of Kentucky, not far from the Tennessee boundary. The land here is very hilly. Some of the hills are so steep you wonder why the corn does not slide off. A good deal of soil does.

Will raises tobacco. It has been grown here for a long time, though not so long as in the old original tobacco country. John Rolfe deserves fame for something more than marrying Pocahontas; he started the modern tobacco growing business at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1612, learning from the Indians. Six years later Virginia was shipping 20,000 pounds to England, and before 1630 overproduction brought the first crop-control law, limiting the number of leaves a man could harvest from each plant.

The tobacco that Will Ashton grows is Burley, now used mainly for cigarettes. His whole farm is less than 40 acres, but he gets practically all his cash income from the part planted to tobacco, which in 1954 was 2½ acres. That year about 10 percent of the Burley crop was pledged for Commodity Credit Corporation loans, but in 1955 this increased to 20 percent. The following year acreage allotments were reduced, and Will was not allowed to grow tobacco on more than one and three-fourths acres. Four out of five Burley producers were in the same situation. This process splits up tobacco production in still smaller pieces (they were small to start with), but how much it reduces production in the long run is debatable. Since 1920 the United States tobacco acreage has changed very little, but production has greatly increased—in the case of Burley, more than 100 percent. When prices go down, a man tries to plant more land to get the same amount of income; if his land is cut in half, he tries to grow two leaves of tobacco where only one grew before. Apparently he has a good chance of succeeding.

Tobacco farms are small.

This is evidence of progress in production techniques such as you find elsewhere in agriculture. Yet tobacco growing has, on the whole, been curiously static, not following the trends in other types of farming. There has been little mechanization, at least in the great Middle Atlantic region where most of the tobacco is grown. Though tractors are coming in, most of the work even on the bigger farms is still done by mule or horse. But a big tobacco farm is small in comparison with a big farm of practically any other type. In the main the crop is grown in small patches and at small profit. More than half the growers, and over 70 percent of those producing Burley, are at the lower end of the economic scale, Classes V and VI in the Census terminology. A grower may not actually lose money, but he is likely to get little for his labor, and tobacco demands a great deal of labor. Very few farmers are getting rich supplying the needs of the devotees of Lady Nicotine. In the Kentucky Burley area in 1954 only about one grower in a thousand had as much as 20 acres in tobacco.

Farms growing tobacco in the South

	Percent
Less than 1 acre.....	33
Less than 2.5 acres.....	54
Less than 5 acres.....	81
Less than 10 acres.....	97

**Will's net cash return, \$675 a year.****Farm sales per tobacco farm in the South : 1954**

Crops .....	\$3,043
Livestock and livestock products.....	275
Other .....	10
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>3,328</b>

**Of comforts, little.**

Where Will Ashton lives, more than 9 out of 10 growers are white, though farther east, in the flue-cured tobacco areas of the Carolinas, a third are Negro. Also, more than three-fourths of Will's fellow growers own their farms, though in the flue-cured tobacco areas croppers and other tenants outnumber owners. The value of the total investment in the Ashton place as of 1954 might be reckoned at a little over \$5,000, of which land and buildings accounted for something less than \$4,000, equipment (no power machinery) for \$1,000, and livestock for about \$300. The livestock consisted of a mule, a milk cow, a heifer, a young home-raised steer, a pig or two and a couple of dozen chickens. Of the 40 acres in the farm about half was cropland—the bulk of it pasture, plus corn and the tobacco patch. Woodland took about another 10 acres and grazing land and wasteland the remaining 10.

Aside from tobacco sales of \$685 in 1954, the Ashtons were able to sell other crop products worth about \$15 and meat and eggs worth about \$100. The total cash expenses amounted to at least \$125, not including interest and other costs, so the net return was not over \$675. Of course Will and his wife Sophie (they are no longer young, being close to 60) and their grown daughter Anna Mae (the other children left the farm when they married) get a fair amount of food off the place, which helps to make ends meet. There is in fact still a good deal of out-and-out subsistence farming in this area, which remains one of the most rural and least urbanized in the United States.

Of comforts they have little more than Jim and Sarah Doxey—a somewhat more solid house because the climate is colder, but a well for water, an outhouse for toilet, a tin basin for washing, a galvanized tub for bathing and laundry, a spring house on the hillside for refrigeration, a stove and woodpile for cooking and heating, a wagon and the mule for getting around. Electric lights and a radio they do have, and a good small tobacco barn for curing the crop, and enough other barn and shed space for the animals and tools.

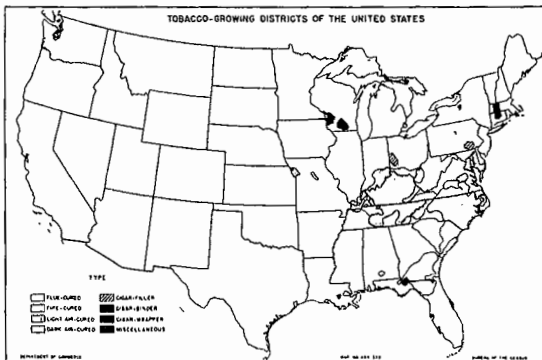
**Hand work and mule work.**

Neither Will nor Sophie have any outside work to supplement their farm income, but Anna Mae does a day's housework away from home whenever she can get it. The opportunities for outside employment are very limited, especially without an automobile for transportation, and no bus nearby; and besides, the Ashtons are about as closely tied to the land as all farmers used to be before modern machinery so greatly expanded what a man could do in a day. In the first place, his operation is too small to afford machinery or hired labor. In the second place, there is no way, yet, to harvest tobacco except by hand, just as there was no other way to harvest cotton until a short time ago. Will has all he can do, with help from the womenfolk and children, to cut the plants when harvest time comes, wilt them in the field, spear the big stalks on tobacco sticks, lift the heavy drooping plants with their enormous leaves to the racks on the long wagon, unload them at the barn, and lift them again to the horizontal poles that rise in several tiers up to the roof, where they hang, with carefully watched ventilation, to dry; and finally to sort them leaf by leaf into grades, tie the leaves in flat bundles, or hands, and haul the hands to the annual tobacco auction in a warehouse not far away, where they are sold along with the thousands of other bundles in the picturesque, hectic ceremony that a tobacco auction is.

Since there are no machines to reduce the time and labor required for this part of the work and Will can seldom hire help or power machinery for seed planting (which is done in coldframes anyway), plowing, transplanting the delicate plants, spreading and placing the fertilizer (of which he has to use a good deal), cultivating and weeding, topping or cutting out the tip of the plant at just the right stage, suckering or removing the side shoots as they develop in the leaf axils, and combating the diseases and insects that have accumulated in the main tobacco areas from nearly 300 years of growing the same crop in the same place. Even if power machines were available for all of these operations, as they are not, he can manage the work with hand tools and mule tools and do the farm chores besides. So why get anything more elaborate even if he had the money?

### Some growers are more prosperous.

Not all tobacco growers are in Will Ashton's situation, of course, and not all tobacco-growing districts are like this one. For example, a big-scale grower in Economic Class I in this area (only three-tenths of one percent were at that level) might have had gross sales amounting to \$30,000 in 1954, of which \$20,000 would come from tobacco and about \$10,000 from livestock and livestock products, including dairy, beef, and pork. A healthy diversification such as this is increasing. There are other differences. In the central bluegrass area of Kentucky, where Burley is also grown, the soil is better and more productive than where the Ashtons live and the tobacco does not need so much commercial fertilizer, which reduces production costs. In the flue-cured tobacco areas near the Atlantic Coast, less than half of the growers are in Economic Classes V and VI instead of about three-fourths where the Ashtons live. And the cigar-tobacco districts in the North—Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin—are of course quite different from the tobacco areas in the South, but also much less important in the whole tobacco picture.



Yet under these variations is the stubborn fact that on the average an acre of tobacco takes 18 times as many man-hours of work as an acre of small grain, and seven times as many as an acre of corn, and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  times as many as an acre of cotton, and twice as many horse-hours as an acre of corn; so that in 1942, according to W. W. Garner, who quotes these figures in *Production of Tobacco* (Blakiston 1951), it took an hour's work for a man to produce three pounds of tobacco, worth at that time \$1.10. This was during the War. Minus expenses, the net return would be considerably less. It seems like small profit for the experience, knowledge, judgment, and hard work required to grow tobacco successfully.