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Bright Leaf: The Tobacco Culture of the Old Belt of Virginia

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On an early spring morning, Talbert Callands and two helpers planted tobacco on a hill beside the Bannister River in Pittsylvania County. His 1950 John Deere tractor sputtered rhythmically as it crept along the furrowed soil. On the transplanter in back sat his helpers, feeding the tobacco seedlings into the ancient single-row planter, which creaked and groaned as it deposited the seedlings into the ground, simultaneously watering and covering the roots with soil.

During a break, Talbert, who is 80, talked about his childhood. His grandfather was born a slave. His father died when Talbert was 11. He has a sixth grade education, yet his eight children all graduated from high school and four attended college. "Tobacco is education," he said, "I've been blessed."

Virginia's Rural Economic Analysis Program at Virginia Tech has awarded a research/pre-production grant for a documentary film titled, *Bright Leaf: The Tobacco Culture of the Old Belt of Virginia*. The project is also supported by grants from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy and the Southern Tobacco Communities Project.

Within the scope of this documentary are many of the players and factors which make up the history of Virginia: from slavery to emancipation, from hands of tobacco to transgenic tobacco research. By weaving the voices and stories of these tobacco farmers with the history and agrarian traditions of Southside Virginia, this story speaks to the foundation of our nation and offers a glimpse into our hopes for the changing future.

The film will document the tobacco culture of the Old Belt of Southside Virginia, a region that straddles the Virginia-North Carolina border and is approximately 80 miles long by 150 miles wide, with Danville, Virginia located near its center. The Bright Leaf tobacco industry was first developed here in the 1860s. The film will focus on Pittsylvania County, Virginia's leading production area for Bright Leaf tobacco, and historically the focal point of Virginia's Old Belt.

Bright Leaf refers to a group of tobacco varieties that are flue-cured or fire-cured, after which the leaves range from light yellow to dark orange in color. Bright leaf is used mainly in cigarettes and is also known as "Virginia tobacco."

In 1997, Virginia had 5,870 tobacco farms (Virginia Agricultural Statistics Service). Tobacco is the leading agricultural crop in Virginia, with over $178 million in cash receipts in 1998, ranking Virginia fourth of the 16 tobacco producing states. Bright Leaf tobacco accounts for nearly three quarters of the tobacco cash sales in Virginia.

In the dimly lit Motley's tobacco auction warehouse in Danville, Virginia, Howard Kendrick waits with a group of fellow farmers for his tobacco to be auctioned. "It looks like to me they want to do away with tobacco," he said, talking about the future of tobacco. "And if they do, I don't know how I am going to pay my taxes. There is no money in wheat, nothing in corn. Back in the '50s, wheat was $3.50 a bushel, now it isn't but $2.00. And everything you put your hands on has gone up. So how are we going to stay in business?"

This question is on the minds of many Virginia tobacco farmers. As we enter the new millennium, Virginia's rural farming community is facing an uncertain future. Tobacco production is declining in the United States, and this trend is expected to continue, as foreign tobacco production increases.

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Tobacco farmers are reeling under 50 percent quota cuts implemented across the past three years, resulting in the lowest level of production since the government started keeping records in 1938. The recently announced tobacco quota for 2001 stops this trend of quota cuts, but with only a 1 percent increase over last year's historically low level.

The economic hardships many farmers face along with the possibility of further cuts is felt on the farm and in the small communities. Lee Wright, a former Pittsylvania County tobacco extension agent said, "You know, the majority of industry in Pittsylvania County is farm related . When you talk about Pittsylvania County, you're talking about tobacco. What's been happening since talk of tobacco settlements and buy-outs started has folks down there worried. They'll tell you the county is based on tobacco, and if it's gone, Pittsylvania County could end up being like a ghost town."

The economic stress experienced by Virginia's tobacco farmers is similar to that experienced by farmers throughout the United States. The burgeoning global economy is a prime mover in this changing economic reality for tobacco farmers.

Aubrey Knuckles, 41, received his Agricultural Engineering degree from Virginia Tech in 1984. He farms around 15 acres of tobacco along with other crops. He, his wife, and two children live in a circa 1833 home. His children are the seventh generation to live on this farm. "I think it has been a corporate, pseudo-political decision to export the tobacco production business to the third world countries," he said, talking about tobacco farmer's economic problems. "The companies benefit because they can get cheaper tobacco. And every corporation benefits because if the third world countries can sell a profitable crop, they will have money to buy other corporate goods. Corporations, politicians, and everybody is happy—except the tobacco farmers who are sacrificed."

Adding to the uncertainty facing Virginia's tobacco farmers is the decision by tobacco manufacturers to contract for all the tobacco they intend to buy from Virginia's producers instead of buying tobacco at auction. This decision marks a historic time in tobacco production in Virginia. Last year may have been the last year that most of Virginia's tobacco was sold on the warehouse auction floor under a marketing system that began in Danville in the 1880s and is still referred to as "the Danville system." Next year, the auctioneer's call will not be heard as loudly in Virginia. The impact this contract system will have on Virginia tobacco producers is yet to be seen.

Jimmy Thompson III, a fourth generation tobacco farmer, owns about ten acres of tobacco allotment and rents an additional eight acres. "I'm living in poverty conditions," he said, talking about the impact of recent quota cuts and his expenses farming tobacco. "It's like the two guys that bought themselves a truck and went to Florida to get some watermelons. They bought them for two for a dollar and came up here selling them for fifty cents a piece. They couldn't figure out why they didn't have enough money. One of them said to the other, 'We need a bigger truck.'"

Along with economic changes, tobacco farmers are confronted with rapid changes in social and cultural attitudes toward the historically and economically important tobacco crop. Mounting evidence from the health community indicates that tobacco is hazardous to the user's health. Recent precedent-setting court rulings have established the liability of tobacco manufacturers in tobacco-related deaths.

Within these complex forces of change are the tobacco farmers, their families, and their communities, whose livelihoods and culture have been shaped by tobacco for over 200 years. The first English settlement on this continent, Jamestown, became a tobacco colony. Tobacco cultivation, with its settlement patterns, intensive labor and land demands, export-dominated economic structures as well as the immense wealth it has generated, has left its unique signature on the nation and on Virginia's Southern Piedmont in particular.

The *Bright Leaf* documentary film will present the historical, geographic, economic, cultural, and political factors that have combined to form this unique rural region of Virginia's Southern Piedmont. This work is important in and of itself. It will serve as a documentation of a culture in its past and present form that, by all accounts, is destined to vanish from the landscape of Virginia. Additionally, those charged with aiding Virginia's tobacco farmers and their communities will benefit through an increased understanding of the culture and the distinctive regional character underlying the economic problems currently facing Virginia's Bright Leaf tobacco farmers.

The heart of the *Bright Leaf* film rests in the lives and histories of the tobacco farmers themselves. Oral histories of 30 tobacco farmers have been collected. Additionally, interviews of others involved in tobacco production, including warehousemen, agricultural extension agents, politicians, and numerous others in Southside Virginia were conducted.

Several themes appear in these interviews. The history of the development and marketing of Bright Leaf tobacco can be visually understood and given life in the multitude of historic structures that dot the landscape of Southside Virginia, from antebellum, log tobacco drying barns that predate the introduction of flues, to the many barns and structures that are examples of the stages of development of flue cured tobacco up to the modern bulk drying barns. Several homes of the Gothic revival style, dating back to the 1840s, still stand, to tell of the spread of ideas that resulted from better communication and transportation.

The geography of the region is a central factor in the history of tobacco in the Old Belt even up to the present. Its location is outside Virginia's cultural, economic, and political heartland of the Tidewater and Piedmont regions of the Chesapeake Basin. The soil and climate of the Old Belt are perfectly suited to the cultivation of Bright Leaf tobacco. Extension agent Lee Wright said, "Tobacco fits there extremely well, and really that's about all that fits there."

Nannie Tilley, author of *The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 1860-1929*, wrote about the relationship of Bright Leaf tobacco and the soil:

> Bright tobacco, first produced successfully in the Old Belt, represents an achievement controlled by soil and methods of curing. It is also an anachronism in the agricultural system, since the best type of yellow leaf is produced on thin, sterile soils unfit for prosperous farming in general (p. 11).

She goes on to relate how, in the late nineteenth century, neighboring counties competed and argued over which county had the poorest soils and thus could grow the best bright leaf tobacco.

Central to understanding the culture of tobacco in Southside Virginia is tobacco's demand for labor. "I think tobacco is probably the most labor intensive crop there is. Traditionally, it always has been, and I don't think there's anything out there that would even come close to it," Lee Wright said. This demand for labor was a key factor for indentured servitude and slavery in Southside Virginia. In 1860, 40 percent of Pittsylvania County households owned slaves, whereas for the rest of the southern United States in this period, this figure was 25 percent (Siegel). After emancipation, farm labor remained a crucial issue. The tenant system became an important method of raising tobacco. Up to the 1920s, 50 percent of the farms in Southside Virginia were operated by tenants. According to tobacco historian Nannie Tilley, not only freed blacks but poor whites fell into this web of farm tenancy and left a legacy of racial stress and poorly educated children across the tobacco belt. Today, most of the labor in the tobacco fields are Mexican migrant workers.

The establishment of the allotment system in the 1930s, designed to help the beleaguered tobacco farmer, changed the cultural landscape of the Old Belt by stabilizing tobacco prices so that the small farmer could survive. According to Senator Charles Hawkins, "It has allowed the smaller farmer, that person that raised five to six acres when I was coming up, to be able to survive on the farm." Many Southside Virginia farmers worry that the allotment system will end, which would allow anyone to grow tobacco. If this happens, they believe production will move south to Alabama and Texas and west to California, areas with large, flat farmland favorable to large industrialized farms. Virginia farmers say that they would not be able to compete with the high volume, post-allotment farmers because Virginia farms are typically small, family farms, and the rolling Piedmont topography is ill-suited for large mechanized planters and harvesters.

Willie Edward Thompson is a 77 year old black tobacco farmer and native of Pittsylvania County. His parents were tobacco sharecroppers, and he grew up working the fields for them along with his brothers and sisters. "I don't have an education at all," he said. "My education was poor because there were a lot of us in the family. And three of us four boys couldn't go to school. We had to walk. There wasn't such a thing as a bus for black children." When asked about his children's education, he said, "I had four boys and four girls, all them went through high school. They rode the bus. And I had one girl go to college."

Willie Thompson owns the allotment on a third of the 77,000 pounds he raises; the rest is rented allotment. He was a sharecropper for much of his early life. "I just worked the tobacco and got half of what I made. I gave half of my labor until I was 40 years old."

Other issues to come from these interviews relate to the geography of the region. Land-use patterns of tobacco cultivation are such that many acres of land are forested. Because tobacco is the main cash crop and does not involve large acreage per farm, mature hardwood forests cover much of the countryside. With their quotas reduced, tobacco farmers are having to sell portions of their timber acreage to make up for lost income. Clear-cut areas are increasing. The resulting clear-cuts wreak havoc on many unique habitats. One such habitat associated with the Triassic Basin, which extends through the central part of Pittsylvania County, is the presence of vernal pools. These temporary wetlands in wooded swales offer unique habitat breeding areas for rare amphibians. The economic options of the farmers and the specific awareness of environmentalists pose a present day dilemma.

Another survival option for economically stressed farmers occurred at a farm auction recently. The farm was bought by a mobile home manufacturer who plans to put homes on it and cut the timbered portions. "That was the best tobacco land around here," said Douglas Cox who lives across the road from the fluttering survey tapes.

The most compelling aspect of the tobacco culture of the Old Belt rests in the lives and histories of the tobacco farmers themselves. The deep traditions of tobacco have impacted their lives and their communities. One of the questions put to the farmers was, "What do you see as the future of tobacco?" Their answers reflect their love of farming tobacco and their hope in the face of an uncertain future.

"I'll continue to farm," Aubrey Knuckles said. "I plan to continue to farm with or without tobacco. And I get just as much satisfaction out of growing corn or pumpkins or wheat as I do growing tobacco. Tobacco just happens to be the crop that we historically grow, and historically it's made us money. It sent me to college, fed me, and bought my cars and sustained our families for generations. So yes, I'll continue growing it as long as I can. I don't have an extremely high standard of living now, and without tobacco I would lower it even more."

Bright Leaf tells a now familiar story of families adjusting to uncertainty. It has been told in the coalfields, the textile mill towns, and many other areas. Now it is being told in the tobacco areas.

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