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A Peek at the Script: "Bright Leaf: The Tobacco Culture of the Old Belt of Virginia"

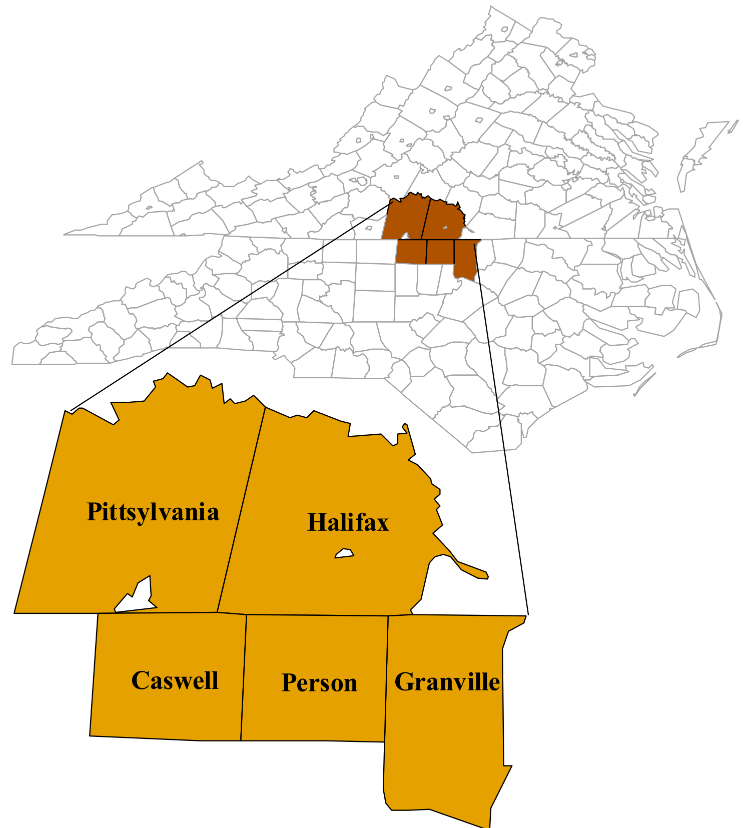
Jim Crawford

Within the backdrop of the current changes and pressures tobacco farmers are facing, the film "Bright Leaf: The Tobacco Culture of the Old Belt of Virginia" tells the story of tobacco in Virginia and of bright leaf tobacco in the Old Belt. The culture of the Old Belt is a dynamic expression of the region's "way of life." Central to this way of life in the Old Belt region has been tobacco and its tangible (technology and tools) and intangible (language and values) components that make this region unique. What follows are excerpts from the film script and the story the film tells.[1]

> "Within, I'd say, a ten-mile radius of right here where we're sitting, there is no question in my mind that some of the finest tobacco ever grown anywhere, anytime, was right here in this section. And the tobacco that we grow here in central and Southside Virginia is traded and known the world over as "Virginia Bright." And any of the veterans, the company men, will tell you, to make what is normally called a high quality, top of the line, blended cigarette, they've almost got to have Old Belt tobacco."
> *Lewis Gregory*.[2]

Both a local and global story, "Bright Leaf" describes the decline of the small, family tobacco farms in the face of increasing global economic factors that have reduced the amount of domestically grown tobacco that the tobacco companies buy in favor of cheaper tobacco grown overseas. During the research for and the writing of this script, U.S. tobacco farmers have experienced large reductions in their quotas. For the 2002 season, the quotas are about 44 percent less than in 1999.

The Old Belt



[1]Editor's Note: Research and script development were funded by grants from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, the Rural Economic Analysis Program, The Southern Tobacco Communities Project, and Dreaming Hand Foundation. Production funding is being sought to produce the film with Media and Broadcast Services at Virginia Tech. Pending successful fund-raising, filming will take place during the 2002 tobacco season.

[2]All quotations are from the film script

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Virginia Tech

The shooting script draws on literature about tobacco in Virginia, oral histories of tobacco farmers, and the geography of the region as the foundation of the story of Bright Leaf tobacco.

> "So yeah, it some kind of took away the family deal 'cause if you got kids it's hard to encourage your kids to go into farming the way it is. Because you want the best for them and right now I can't say farming is the best life for them." *Bernard Coles*

Oral histories, resulting from interviews with 30 tobacco farmers, mostly from Pittsylvania County, Virginia's leading production area for Bright Leaf, were recorded. Of these 30, 12 were selected as representative of the "tobacco farmers" and of different profiles present in the group. Sometimes a farmer's story is used to illustrate a specific historic occurrence such as sharecropping and early migration. The representative profiles include race, social factors, family heritage in the region, scale of production, level of economic dependence on tobacco, and response to the pressures that tobacco farmers are experiencing. The oral histories of all the tobacco farmers factored into the decisions about whom to use in the film. Many other people associated with tobacco and tobacco communities were interviewed during the course of the research.

> "Tobacco has made a big change for people like me. And there are a lot more people around like me at my age. They can't do nothing but depend on tobacco." *Willie Thompson*

The demand for labor for tobacco production is fundamental to understanding its impact on the region.

Narrator*: The labor demands of tobacco production were harsh: one man could tend only two or three acres of tobacco. The need for labor to produce tobacco led Englishmen to treat men and women as property. Until the last quarter of the seventeenth century, most of the labor force was white and mostly indentured servants from the British Isles. After that, the shift in the labor force from indentured servitude to African slavery was swift and cataclysmic. From the beginning, Virginia was a tobacco colony. Plantations along the abundant waterways of the Chesapeake produced tobacco for export as practically the whole of its agricultural output until the American Revolution. Virginia is positioned at the northern end of a coastal culture region, thousands of miles long, that stretched from Brazil to Virginia. Anthropologist Charles Wagley called this culture zone "Plantation America." Ruled by a European elite dependent upon an African slave labor force, the plantation production system focused on mono-crop production and concentrated land in the hands of elite families. It instilled rigid class lines as well as a multiracial society that bestowed privilege to people with lighter skin.*

The script covers more than just the headlines and recent surveys of regional poverty. It puts faces on the story of the decline of tobacco in the Old Belt. It evokes the sense of place. Rather than focusing the documentary entirely on the most recent events and nuances in the complex changes in the world of tobacco—be it manufacturing, trade, or production—the script also examines the culture of tobacco. The script tries to find a balance between explaining this culture and telling about the recent changes affecting the farmers' livelihoods.

Many factors are present in this culture. Beginning in colonial times with the plantation mode of production and the reliance on African slave labor, tobacco left its mark on the region. We see this characteristic brought forward in the histories of some of the black farmers in the script. The story continues through emancipation and the dire conditions in the region under sharecropping and farm tenancy.
The creation of the Tobacco Allotment program by President Roosevelt in the late 1930s was a defining event to the culture of tobacco in the United States.

> "I work with the man on half, and he always sell everything. I just worked the tobacco and get half of what I made. I got half of what I make, on until I was about 40 years old, I give half of my labor until I was 40 years old. Sure did." *Willie Thompson*

This system of quotas and allotments shaped the landscape of the region. The control over production and the price support system have helped stabilize the region's economy up to the present.

> "Without the allotment system, they couldn't compete. And it has allowed that person that raised five to six acres when I was coming up to be able to survive on the farm. Now it's impossible for a person to survive with that small of an acreage." *Sen. Charles Hawkins*

Narrator: *The effect of the tobacco program on the region draws a complex response. Some experts feel the program merely propped up small farmers who otherwise would not survive in modern conditions. Tobacco farmers say that the stability the tobacco program brought to the region not only had obvious economic benefits (tobacco is still Virginia's leading agricultural crop), but the region has also been enriched by the values of family farms and close-knit farm communities.*

Yet, further changes to tobacco marketing and production are casting doubt on the future of the allotment system. This

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year in the Old Belt, most of the tobacco will be contracted directly with the tobacco companies. Only one tobacco warehouse, Motley's Warehouse in Danville, will sell farmers' tobacco at auction. Many farmers see this change as a prelude to the end of the tobacco program.

> "So what's our future? I don't know. I honestly don't know. We're just as much a victim and we're just as much addicted to tobacco as anyone--and many of us have never inhaled. People just don't understand who we are and why we do what we do." *J. T. Davis*

Over the three years since this documentary project began with the collection of oral histories, significant changes occurred for many of those interviewed. Several of the farmers who had farmed small tobacco allotments have retired and either leased or sold their allotments. Several of the smaller tobacco farmers continue to farm and will sell their tobacco in 2002 within the tobacco program on the warehouse floor.

However, the majority of farmers interviewed are now selling most of their 2002 tobacco through contracts with tobacco companies. The larger tobacco producers are trying to lease or buy more tobacco quota to offset the quota cuts they have received, thus strengthening the trend towards larger producers in the region. Today in Pittsylvania County, around 550 farmers produce nearly 13 million pounds of bright leaf tobacco on 5,000 acres. Many farmers feel that in the not-too-distant future there could be only 10 or 20 tobacco farmers producing the allotted tobacco in Pittsylvania County.

> "The larger farmer is going to get bigger. They are the ones that are going to make it. And that is sad. It seems to be the wave of all industry, and I don't like to see one farmer go out of business. I think it is in the interest of everyone, you know, small, medium, large, the whole mix. I'd like to see everyone make it. The farm community, to me now, that has made up a part of my life that is important—just like making money—is working on the farm. The farm community, I feel, has given me that quality of life. And if farmers are going out of business it's very obvious that probably more farms will go up for sale, an influx of people [will] come in from other sections of the country and buy up these farms. Of course, they split them up into lots and tracts, and you change the entire community [from] what I am used to. The people that have been my neighbors, people I am close to, suddenly all that changes. And that's what makes me sad." *C. D. Bryant, III*

In today's global economic atmosphere that favors industrial agriculture, economists see the Old Belt's patchwork of small farms as a detriment to growth. The region's smallest tobacco farmers are the first to crumble from the pressure of quota cuts.

> "[We] are in a situation where [we] want to maintain the family farm. It is a good quality of life. We feel like it is second to none, particularly when it comes to raising children. I think you will find, for instance, in Southside Virginia, some of the best work ethics, the best work force that there is because most of it is based upon farming." *J. T. Davis*

The search for alternative corps to tobacco has been ongoing for years in the region. Many farmers in the region took part in various efforts to establish markets for cucumbers and broccoli. Bobby Connor served as chairman for a group of Southside farmers working to establish a broccoli cooperative. "We were looking at all kinds of alternatives, we did the broccoli thing big time. I served as the first chairman for four or five years of the broccoli co-op. The effort failed," Mr. Connor said.

> "The market is two months ahead of us with everything we can grow. With this cucumber and broccoli thing, I'd make more, my commissions would be more, if I was a zipper salesman in a nudist colony than if I planted the farm in that stuff." *Lewis Gregory*

Size of farms and Virginia's climate are cited as impediments to alternative crops for Southside's tobacco farmers. Aubrey Nuckols grows some pumpkins along with his tobacco crop. "If every tobacco farmer went into the pumpkin business, the market would be flooded. The tobacco farmers in Pittsylvania County could grow enough pumpkins for the East Coast. And that's not realistic. It wouldn't happen. It's similar to broccoli. It can't be one crop, because our growing season is not long enough to extend [production] over a whole year so we have a very short window to get the vegetables in," he said.

Narrator*: The pressure on the tobacco farmers of the Old Belt has led to an unusual alliance between tobacco farmers and the health community. One of the points of agreement is that the tobacco program should continue because it restricts tobacco farming to the states that historically grew tobacco. Without the tobacco program, production would increase and prices would fall, which neither the health community nor tobacco farmers desire.*

The unlikely alliance between tobacco growers and the health community was the result of early, open discussions. The purpose of these discussions, sponsored by The Southern Tobacco Communities Project and funded by the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, were to help the tobacco growers and the health community find common ground to the challenges and opportunities confronting both groups. A list of agreements between the two groups, called the Core Principal Statement, was published in 1998 and represents a significant effort to find solutions that will protect public health,

> "[Selling the farm] would be like losing a family member. It would hurt really bad, really, really bad. And I'm seven generations to own this farm, and the farm in Renan, I am five to farm it. That farm up there is a better row crop farm than this, but I would sell that one before I would sell this one. But it would be difficult to get rid on my land. That's more important than whatever crop we grow. The land is more important than the crop." *Aubrey Nuckols*

reduce tobacco producers' dependence on tobacco, and provide economic stability for the future in the tobacco producing regions.

Whatever the future holds for these tobacco farmers, their legacy has left its mark on Virginia. The rolling, wooded farmland speaks of the bonds of tobacco and history and the bond between land and mankind. The story of Virginia's Old Belt will continue with new players, some who have felt directly the influence of their legacy and others who are new to the area who will inevitably feel the legacy of those who preceded them.

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****Farm and Family Showcase 2002** is scheduled for September 5, 6, and 7. This three day event is filled with exhibits, demonstrations, seminars, and a trade show. Admission is free. The Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics will be sharing exhibit space with the AgEcon/NAMA Club. The Club will have hands-on activities for kids. Mark your calendar and plan to attend at least one day.

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