

***Tobacco Culture. Farming Kentucky's Burley Belt*, by John van Willigen and Susan Eastwood, Louisville: University Press of Kentucky**

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**Abstract:**

Tobacco and its impacts on human health and the environment are well documented, but less has been written about the lives of tobacco producers. In *Tobacco Culture*, van Willigen and Eastwood help fill this void by providing a rich local history of tobacco growing, starting with the early producers in the New World and leading up to the contemporary battles of global competition for tobacco, but focusing mainly on the impact of these changes on the remaining Kentucky producers.

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**Article:**

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Burley tobacco, a variety known for its low sugar content, is unique to central Kentucky. Burley tobacco is harvested plant by plant, and slowly air-cured. These harvest and curing techniques, among many production practices described in *Tobacco Culture*, distinguish burley tobacco from other varieties found in the southern United States. What makes this book so enjoyable is the producers' direct and extensive commentary on their circumstances. From these producers we learn about current problems in tobacco production and marketing, as well as their stories from the remembered past.

For several centuries tobacco has contributed significantly to local, national and international economic development. *Tobacco Culture* provides a detailed history illustrating how producers relied first on the plantation-slave production system and how, when slavery was ended, they turned to family members and neighbors to aid in production. Gradually, sharecroppers and tenant farmers came to work alongside landowners in local production. However, while some sharecroppers and tenant farmers began their own growing operations, others have moved out of

farming altogether. Today, Kentucky burley tobacco producers are mainly small-scale producers. The majority now cultivate fewer than two acres. To increase their yields and stabilize labor costs, growers have intensified their production • initially through crop rotation, and later through increased chemical inputs. In addition, today's burley tobacco producers are assisted by seasonal migrant laborers, the majority coming to Kentucky (and elsewhere in the southern tobacco belt) from Mexico.

In addition to this trend towards fewer, smaller operations with more intensive chemical inputs, the history of burley tobacco production includes the rise and fall of a number of grower associations since the beginning of the 20th century. It is impossible to appreciate the local growers' circumstances, or how their production decisions affect local environmental conditions, without the historical context that *Tobacco Culture* describes concerning the tobacco quota and allotment system, price fluctuations, market collapses, subsidy and price support systems in the face of increased competition from overseas tobacco. Since the 1930s, tobacco marketing has been subject to federal supervision. "Growers who participated in the Burley Tobacco Program are authorized to sell a certain number of pounds of tobacco at or above a minimum support price during each marketing year. The total number of pounds that can be sold in a given year is determined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture." (p. 38). One hundred fifteen government grades of tobacco are each assigned a fixed price, which is determined by the quality of the demand of the grade.

To be successful, producers must develop highly refined skills in classifying and packaging their tobacco. They also must master a formidable body of botanical and horticultural knowledge. The tobacco plant varieties have changed, as have the techniques used in ground preparation, fertilizer use and chemical inputs. The production changes have aimed to increase yields, especially since the federal pricing and production quota system is now based on weight rather than land area in production. As the authors point out, in some cases the technological modifications have had detrimental effects on humans and the environment. Ironically, aiming for additional weight through heavier fertilizer use has, in the growers' opinion, hurt the quality of the tobacco (p.24).

Although this book is not an instructional manual on tobacco production, *Tobacco Culture* describes in considerable the practices for sowing the beds, setting plants and how seed technology has changed over the years. Originally, growers' concern lay in protecting a crop from weeds and pests. However, keeping up with the chemical inputs has been a challenge given the chemical resistance that fungi, insects and weeds have developed. More senior growers recalled what it was like cultivating before the heavy chemicals were used. Today, chemicals are used also to reduce the labor time investment in producing a quality tobacco crop. For example, Uniroyal has developed a chemical which weakens the sucker, which enables the grower to spray his crop in a much shorter amount of time that it would have if s/he had gone out to the field to de-sucker by hand (p. 114). In another case a grower recalls, "we used to worm by hand" (p. 107-108), but worms are now removed with chemicals. Growers told about the "early days, when

tobacco was set by hand" (p. 97-101), and now some growers are floating plants in water in styrofoam trays as a way to set them. These new technologies developed over the years have helped with breeding programs designed to create seed varieties resistant to disease and increase yields. According to the interviews, these "technological and management strategies" have been met with mixed results.

Once harvested, burley tobacco is cured by much the same slow process as it has been throughout the past two centuries. And after curing, it is taken to a stripping room and prepared for market. The tobacco is hand-graded based on age, the position of the leaf on the stalk, and moisture content. Each of these practices is treated in an individual chapter, nicely supplemented with photographs to illustrate past and present techniques. Clearly, there is an art, skill, and culture of raising burley tobacco shared among Kentucky tobacco producers.

"Because tobacco is bought and sold by the pound, farmers are interested in the factors that affect the weight of the crop. There is a difference in the weight of some varieties" (p.162). However, plant variety, month of selling tobacco and which warehouse the tobacco is taken to for sale all factor into where the grower feels s/he is getting the best price per pound. According to some of the accounts, not all warehouses are honest in how they grade the tobacco.

*Tobacco Culture* describes changes that have occurred in the knowledge, beliefs and practices as they pertain to burley tobacco culture. Without being heavy-handed about it, van Willigen and Eastwood demonstrate one of the central tenets of political ecology • how outside institutional forces and available innovations in technology impinge on local agricultural decision-making in a way that has potentially significant environmental consequences.

In addition, the authors note recent changes in demography and labor supply. The number of people working in tobacco in Kentucky and elsewhere in the American South has decreased, with younger generations moving out of farming altogether. As a result, older tobacco growers are supported by seasonal Mexican migrant labor. These shifts in production are transforming communities and the local tobacco culture, not to mention the communities of rural Mexico that supply the able-bodied field hands and become increasingly dependent on remittance income from the Kentucky tobacco fields. Increasingly, tobacco is being supplied to transnational corporations by overseas producers, which poses a serious threat to local communities, especially those that have a long history cultivating tobacco and benefiting from its commercial sale. In the end, the picture painted here is one where growers have decreased their ability to be self-sufficient in production, relying heavily on industry to supply chemical inputs and government to protect their markets.

Overall, this book will be useful for those wishing to add to their knowledge of burley tobacco production, as well as the culture of its growers. As these growers struggle to hold on to a place in the market, we are reminded that tobacco is more than just a cigarette, plug, dip, snuff or a

chew; it has been a way of life for several centuries. *Tobacco Culture* presents a textured portrait of burley tobacco culture without focusing on all the negative health risks associated with the long-term use of the end product. And then, importantly, the authors leave us with two questions that inevitably will shape the future of tobacco in Kentucky and elsewhere. They ask, "Can the market quota system and price incentives work together to get the supply right?" (p.190) And second, "Should government support the tobacco industry for all the health problems it is known to cause?" As reflective and articulate as the growers are about their craft, it would have been to *Tobacco Culture's* additional credit if we could know the answers to these questions supplied by the growers themselves.