

Production and Labor Conditions on Shade Tobacco Farms in the Connecticut River Valley¹

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Introduction

The United States remains one of the primary producers of tobacco in the world, a position it has held since the 17th century, when European colonists became enamored of this indigenously cultivated plant. Today, most US-grown tobacco is cultivated in the southeastern state of North Carolina, whose warm, humid climate is ideally suited for cigarette tobacco.

However, the world's leading producer of tobacco used for wrapping cigars is the northeastern state of Connecticut, whose mild summers and rich, alluvial soil make it an ideal ecological region for cultivating these temperamental plants.



In contrast to cigarette tobacco, which is ultimately ground into a coarse powder, the economic value of wrapper tobacco is completely dependent on the integrity of the leaves: a single tear or blemish can reduce its value on the international market by 50% or more. As a result, this form of tobacco is extremely labor-intensive, with nearly all stages of production, cultivation, curing, and packing carried out by hand.



During the last 60 years, migrant laborers have principally carried out this work, most recently from Jamaica, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. This historical, ethnographic, and photographic essay will examine the unique social, economic, and labor conditions among these migrant groups. In particular, we will examine the ways in which a plant cultivated largely through 19th century technology is deeply enmeshed in transnational processes.

Historical Antecedents

Although tobacco cultivation in North America predates European colonization by several centuries, shade tobacco, which is the principal species used to wrap cigars, was introduced into Connecticut from Sumatra around 1900. Initially, farm labor was carried out almost exclusively by the farmers and their families, most of whom had emigrated from Poland. In contrast to the general trend in US agriculture, most of these farms have remained within the same family through multiple generations. Over time, these farms became increasingly reliant on seasonal, proletarianized labor from the local communities, particularly women and children. Women's labor was particularly prized in bundling the leaves for drying, which requires a good deal of manual dexterity in order to quickly and accurately sew the bundles together.



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Since the 1930s, a significant number of African Americans—principally from the southern states—became part of the migrant labor force in Connecticut's tobacco fields.



The Second World War resulted in chronic labor shortages in the tobacco fields. Citing the importance of tobacco to the national economy, the Connecticut Valley Shade Tobacco Growers Association petitioned the US government to allow foreign guest workers to work in their fields.



As a consequence, large numbers of Jamaicans arrived in Connecticut to work in the tobacco fields. Some of these workers left farm work and settled in the state capital of Hartford with their families, such that Jamaicans and other people of West Indian descent comprise a significant percentage of the city's African-origin population.



Another significant population of tobacco workers that settled in the city is from the island of Puerto Rico, resulting in Hartford having among the highest percentage of people of Puerto Rican descent outside the Caribbean. A more recent group that has established a clear presence in the tobacco fields are laborers from Mexico.

Current Labor Profile

Jamaicans, who are numerically the dominant migrant workers in Connecticut's tobacco industry, receive work contracts brokered through the Jamaican Department of Labor. Workers who are selected and pass the required medical screening receive a temporary agricultural work visa (known as an H-2A visa) from the US government. As a possession of the United States, Puerto Rico's residents are also US citizens, and so do not need visas to work on the mainland. However, they too typically arrive at the tobacco farms through labor contracts between the grower and labor contractors on the island.



In the case of Mexican workers, a sizable number also arrive with labor contracts and H2A work visas, like their Jamaican counterparts. However, an increasing number have entered the country illegally—with neither a work visa nor a labor contract. Among all groups, the labor contract typically includes round trip transportation to Connecticut from the worker's place of origin. This places an additional burden on undocumented Mexican workers, since they must absorb the transportation costs themselves. The latter can run as high as \$2,500 (nearly four million Chilean pesos), due to the expense of paying traffickers to help them to cross the dangerous border region, or to traverse the unforgiving desert trails that separate Mexico and the United States.



Stages of Production



The importance of tobacco production to the local and national economy is well-known. However, the working conditions of shade tobacco workers remains poorly understood.



Our ethnographic fieldwork on Connecticut's tobacco fields began in May 2002. It was the beginning of summer, and the workers had begun preparing the fields for the next harvesting. It was unusually hot and humid for that time of year, foreshadowing some of the challenges that the workers would face during the growing and harvesting season.

As researchers, we did not always have authorization from the growers to venture out to the fields and observe the workers first hand. However, we spent a significant amount of time with the workers in the evening after they returned to their barracks, in order to learn more about their experiences.



Most stages of shade tobacco cultivation and production are carried out by hand, and consequently the work is extremely labor-intensive. Shade tobacco growers estimate that each leaf is handled ten times, a far higher number than most agricultural products. Plowing and planting are the only stages of production that rely on heavy machinery, such as tractors and other agricultural equipment.

Because shade tobacco withers and burns in direct sunlight, workers assemble mesh tarpaulins over the fields once the plants have sprouted. The temperature and humidity under these tents can be quite high, particularly during the warm summer months. Heat exhaustion is not uncommon. Because the price of each tobacco leaf is dependent on their being cosmetically perfect, the plants are sprayed with insecticides and fungicides during cultivation. Some workers report being compelled to return to the fields a short time after spraying, resulting in skin rashes, eye irritation, and respiratory problems. An additional occupational hazard is "green tobacco sickness", which occurs when handling tobacco plants. Nicotine in the plant is ingested through the skin, resulting in an overdose of the drug. Although its effects are temporary, green tobacco sickness may result in a worker missing one or more days of work and consequently, a significant reduction in remittances to send home to their families.



Tobacco harvesting requires that each leaf be inspected for size, and then picked by hand. In order to remove the leaves from the field, some farms use a conveyer belt apparatus that resembles a stationary bicycle. Long sheets of plastic are extended to the end of each row, with one end attached to the conveyer. As the leaves are picked, they are placed on the sheet. When harvesting is finished for that row, a worker pedals the conveyer, thus transporting the leaves out of the field, where they can be crated and transported to the tobacco barn.



The tobacco barns are long wooden structures in which the bundling and curing of the plants occurs. The walls contain movable slats so that the inside temperature and humidity can be regulated. The roofs tend to be high, in order to accommodate the three to four levels of wooden beams from which the tobacco will be hung.



The first stage of tobacco processing consists of sewing the leaves into bundles.



After the leaves are bundled, they are hung from the wooden beams. This work is particularly dangerous, since it requires workers to balance from one of the lower beams as the bundles are passed up to him, so that the bundles can be hung in the uppermost reaches of the barn. Accidents are not uncommon during this stage of production, resulting in back and other injuries.



Once the bundling and hanging of the tobacco are complete, all of the sewing stations are removed from the barn. Propane heaters are then placed on the floor to maintain the proper temperature for curing the leaves.

The curing process takes several days, and is characterized by the sweet aroma of the drying tobacco. After the curing process is completed, the leaves are lowered from the rafters and packed for shipping to the Dominican Republic, where they are inspected and sorted, and then sold to the island's

numerous cigar manufacturers.



For the most part, the workers—regardless of ethnic origin—bear up to the labor abuses of the farmer. For Jamaican workers this passive acceptance, coupled with their facility as native speakers of English and their greater experience with tobacco cultivation and production, have made them highly desirable to growers, and it is not uncommon for these workers to return to the same farm for ten seasons or more.



Similar in situation, although not in prestige, are the Mexican workers. The growing presence of undocumented Mexican workers and the reduced number of their compatriots with work visas have resulted in an increasingly docile labor force during the economic downturn that extended into 2003.

Puerto Rican workers are somewhat distinct from those in the other two ethnic groups since, as United States citizens, feel freer than their counterparts in advocating for improved living and working conditions. As a result, the number of Puerto Rican tobacco workers has been notably reduced during the three previous growing seasons, as the current economic recession has resulted in a downturn in demand for luxury cigars. During the 2003 growing season, for example, one of the largest tobacco farms in the Valley employed 100 Jamaicans, and only 20 Puerto Rican workers.



Workers' Challenges



same farm each year.

Shade tobacco workers face numerous challenges, from the moment they leave their homes until they pack their suitcase at the end of the harvest season. Issues of citizenship, legal status, language, economic necessity, and fluctuations in the international cigar tobacco market have particular effects for each group in terms of modes of production and management-labor relations. For many of the workers, their primary economic strategy depends on returning to the



In order to improve their chances of being invited to return for the following season, many workers take great pains to be perceived by the grower as stoic and hard-working. This often entails unquestioningly carrying out dangerous work and accepting verbal abuse and other forms of mistreatment by the crew leader.

For example, “Franklin”, a Jamaican worker from the capital city of Kingston, commented, “Yeah, our work has some risky parts, in terms of chemicals. You deal with a lot of chemicals in the fields”. “Manuel”, from Ponce, Puerto Rico, noted that, “On this farm I’ve found that there is a lack of drinking water...In the fields, I haven’t seen any water (stations) either above or below. This is essential, to have a place to wash your hands, or so that you can (wash to) eat. Above all are the chemicals...I don’t know if this guy here (the farmer) is struggling, but at least the other guy (the owner of the previous farm where he worked) would give you a little something extra in order to protect yourself”.



For his part, “George”, from Saint Elizabeth, Jamaica, added, “The thing that I find more risky, sometimes the sun is hot, sometimes it’s like ninety degrees (Fahrenheit, forty degrees Celsius) outside...But sometimes there are thunderstorms, lightening, (the workers) may be out there from half an hour before we have to go (inside).

So I find that risky, ya know?” However, “he who doesn’t take a risk doesn’t win” is a common saying in the camps for addressing the dangers and irregularities of farm work. This perspective is summed up by “Carlton”, from Saint Elizabeth, Jamaica, who noted that working conditions “are awful...It effects us a whole lot...But in terms of, we’s here for a reason...we got to live with certain things”.

Conclusion

While the tobacco begins its journey to the Dominican Republic, the workers begin leaving the farms. For the most part, the Puerto Rican workers will return to the Island, while those from Mexico and Jamaica will travel to other agricultural regions in the Northeastern United States to seek work on other farms, in order to earn more money for their families.



Now the fields and barns lie barren in the distance, and the once-crowded barracks are deserted. And next May, a new cycle of planting, harvesting, and exploitation will begin anew.