

**TOBACCO DAYS: A PERSONAL JOURNEY**

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This book is dedicated to those who have touched or have been touched by tobacco in some way, that their experience may have some significance and benefit to others, especially those currently using tobacco for personal enjoyment.

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## Introduction

I grew up in the "burley tobacco belt" that covered the Bluegrass sections of Kentucky and beyond, as well as portions of five neighboring states -- Ohio (where burley originated), West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, and Indiana. Like many of the seven million residents in this region as well as those throughout America's tobacco-growing areas, I changed my views about tobacco over time. Along with other tobacco-related "folks," I have sought to take an honest look at how tobacco entered, influenced, enticed, altered, harmed and left its mark on my life. These folks include a diverse grouping of growers, processors, sellers, users, relatives, advocates for or against, and caregivers for those who have used tobacco and its products in any manner. Actually the potential audience is broadly speaking about half of this country. However, this work is directed as a gentle prod to the one-fifth of American adults who are still tobacco users.

To this audience I present a challenge: see whether the tobacco enticement has marked your life in a significant manner and what you have learned from the process. My own journey with tobacco includes the benefits it gave to our family through income, its use and misuse in smoking, and its imprint on my own life. Reflection, not neglect, may make a difference for many, and so I offer this invitation: come to terms with your tobacco connection and see it on its total merits. The exercise is more than traditional scholarship; it is meant for both yourself and others who are coming to terms with the various allurements and enticements in their own lives -- that may very well go far beyond tobacco and include many other consumer products.

This reflection started with a different goal; I originally wanted to find out about my family's participation in the little known "Black Patch Wars" of Kentucky and Tennessee at the turn of the twentieth century. No one, not even my ordinarily talkative, story-telling father wanted to talk about that "war." The silence became somewhat intriguing, not that there was a family tale being suppressed, but that the respect that our neighbors held for each other, and the desire to heal past civil strife prevailed. Why the ambivalence on this subject? Tobacco was part of our life -- my birth within a culture in rural Kentucky, our collective farm work, the people who used the product on a daily basis, their coughs and breathing difficulties, my own struggles with its effects on myself and on those who live within a smoking environment, the strong

objections upon bringing up this subject, and even the prospects of some future for tobacco in more beneficial ways.

Tobacco has an enchanting side, and so I have delineated eight phases (one for each decade of my life). I start in the 1930s with the history of tobacco as collectively understood in my youth in post-depression times. Next comes a narrative of my somewhat pleasant experience in "raising" tobacco on our family farm in the 1940s. Then I leave home in the 1950s and consider the peer and commercial influences leading to becoming a smoker. Time passes and emerging community health issues with tobacco become apparent in the 1960s, at the time I am completing my doctorate research in a laboratory where fellow chemists are researching carcinogenic chemicals some of which are present in the combustion of tobacco.

With the completion of studies during the 1970s, I begin my public interest career and help found the Center for Science in the Public Interest. Along with an emerging environmental concern is the discovery that environmental tobacco smoke is a major indoor pollution problem, and yet my mention of it brings immediate counter-attacks. Moral questions emerge as a focus during the 1980s. I quit smoking for good. The next decade is a period of advocacy about the effects of tobacco, presented for the most part as a pastoral worker and listener attending to tobacco victims. Finally we are in the twenty-first century and in a sea change of attitudes and a question of future direction: business as usual; alternative products in place of tobacco; beneficial uses of tobacco; or recounting lessons learned by and for people using, overusing and misusing a variety of substances.

After writing the first iteration of this book I realized that I had neglected the experience of tobacco as a template for similar journeys in our consumer-based culture. Yes, other commercial products could be promoted, sold and misused and could require control in much the same manner as tobacco in the twentieth century. I have shifted from what can ensure a future for tobacco growers using tobacco as such, to how this experience benefits other consumers both in this country and abroad. Tobacco has its own versatility, for it -- the apple of the New World's Eden -- is a commodity, a livelihood, a pleasure, a health risk, an addictive substance, an idol, and an experience worth narrating.

A liberation from tobacco becomes a redemption -- a saving of what has been flawed. The more I prove loyal to ancestry, commonwealth, religious tradition, and personal odyssey, the greater the need to relate my tobacco journey. Tobacco is the best example of over-commercialization within our comfort-driven consumer culture both in America and throughout the world.

1930s

## Chapter One: Tobacco as a Livelihood and Pleasure

When a commodity enters into the way one makes a living or helps pay the bills or gets one through college, it is difficult not to have an affinity for such a substance. In fact, my affinity for tobacco goes deep. It goes beyond a mere love of the beautiful plant; maybe that is because I was literally born in what was a tobacco patch, that is, I was born at home in a house our daddy built in dry year 1930 on a rather parched tobacco field -- and there was no basement under the bedroom of my birth-- just tobacco stubs. We kids crawled underneath it once and retrieved some stubs and showed them to our parents, and they didn't want to talk about it -- for the Thirties were tough times for all.

My first recollections of tobacco were the smell of curing tobacco in our large barn. My early life was interwoven with the culture of "raisin' tobacco, our family livelihood. For us, tobacco was somewhat akin to hard and soft currency -- a leafy gold. Our family was deeply aware of local history and world events, but we shared that collective vague understanding of a rather distant history of tobacco. However, our "culture" in the truest sense was rooted in cultivation. To grow tobacco was to participate in a cultural experience with its pleasures and toils, its benefits and its occasional disasters, for we were at the mercy of market forces far beyond our control.

To be more precise, our agrarian culture, although locally-based and specified by burley tobacco actually transcended oceans. For centuries our ancestors cultivated small plots of other crops in similar hilly regions of the Rhine Valley. Even though tobacco was grown there, the European thrust was crops of grains, hay, vegetables and fruit. To make a living and to farm were one and the same, and so the substance grown was less important than that it was a means to a livelihood. When my paternal grandfather came to the Ohio Valley (America's 1870s wine capital), his hope was to have a vineyard, but that hope was soon dashed by a terrible blight to the region's grapes. For him tobacco was a second choice, which he accepted and learned to live with. A similar adoption awaited my maternal great, great grandparents who found tobacco to be a means of livelihood after coming to the Ohio Valley.

This tobacco culture in which my ancestors became immersed consisted of a history that embraced Native American tobacco roots, a Virginian and East Coast Slave period, a trans-Appalachian



farming experience, and a twentieth century cooperative spirit. All these blended to make a specific sub-culture within the burley tobacco belt that included growing food for a livelihood but also producing a marketable product (tobacco) that gave us money for living expenses and gave others pleasure.

#### Peace Pipes and Pleasure

As a family we accepted tobacco's history, not learning it through studies, but through interchange with fellow farming folks. Our first understanding was that tobacco originated in the western hemisphere among Native Americans who cultivated it, modified it, and used it in various ways. Pleasurable aspects of tobacco, the justification for the work in which tobacco folks were engaged, have many expressions, some quite distant in time and thus embellished by a romantic but inaccurate outlook on the "weed." From the standpoint of those in the burley tobacco belt, part of our collective history of tobacco is clouded in the myth of the noble savage (called in popular terms "Indian" or politically correct terms "Native American"), who gave European immigrants the gift of tobacco through the generosity of the Good Spirit; this gift was used by the Indian community (at least we thought) as occasional "peace pipe" smoking ceremonials. The symbolic peace pipe reinforced the reason for making tobacco a legitimate source of income.

From science literature we learned that tobacco is a species (*Nicotiana tabacum*) in the tropical nightshade family *Solanaceae*, genus *Nicotiana*, a Western Hemisphere group of plants, which included tomatoes, potatoes, peppers and eggplants, and has become globalized over time along with many others especially maize. Other South American cultivars of the same genus include *Nicotiana rustica* and *Nicotiana petunioides*, which are known as fragrant flowers and used as ornamentals. Tobacco in some of its early forms goes as far back as 7,000 years ago.<sup>i</sup> Tobacco was used ceremonially, socially, and medicinally by smoking (pipe, cigar and a type of cigarette), snuffing, chewing, and drinking as a brewed tea. Charles Mann points out that tobacco was first domesticated in Amazonia (some say the Andes) and exported north "to become the favorite vice of Indians from Meso-America to Maine."<sup>ii</sup> In Mid-North America the very early mound-building-period Adena used pipes and a tobacco that was much stronger than today's tobacco. It was psychoactive.<sup>iii</sup> The Hopewell, the successors or the later stage of the Adenas, sought spiritual ecstasy by putting themselves into trances aided by tobacco.<sup>iv</sup>

Columbus first encountered the Caribbean peoples who grew a larger type plant, the leaves of which they dried and smoked (or chewed) as rolled tobacco or crushed into flakes or powder to be dipped. For inhaling snuff they used a "y"-shaped pipe called a

"tabaca" with the branch ends put in the nostrils. Columbus and his crew happened into this culture and were presented with a gift of tobacco showing that the material was esteemed by the natives. The sailors, after the initial fright of seeing smoke coming from the natives' noses (they described them as drinking fire), were soon habitually pipe smoking<sup>v</sup> in the Caribbean manner. However, Columbus and his first crew focused their attention on sources of gold, not tobacco.

When Cortez and his company came to Mexico in 1518-19, they found cigarette smoking natives and the use of perfumed reed cigarettes. Within a decade the missionary Bernardino de Sahagun distinguished between a sweet commercial tobacco (*N. tabacum*) and coarse *N. rustica*.<sup>vi</sup> These early Europeans adapted the habit quite quickly and saw the need for a ready source of tobacco; thus the more enterprising Spanish colonists initiated tobacco plantations in the Caribbean on Santo Domingo as early as 1531 and in Cuba in 1534 using broad-leafed sweet *N. tabacum* imported from Central America. The Portuguese began cultivating tobacco in Brazil in 1548 and the product was soon globalized. The first report of tobacco to appear in Europe was by Robert Pane who accompanied Columbus on his second expedition. Tobacco smoking soon spread quickly to the European upper class: France in 1556, Portugal in 1558, Spain in 1559, to Italy and Germany. Jean Nicot (for whom nicotine and the botanical term *Nicotiana tabacum* were named) was the French ambassador to Portugal and was regarded as the first European to describe tobacco's medicinal properties, for it was thought to cure kidney stones and bad breath and even poison arrow wounds. The tobacco substance nicotine was a mild stimulant and so it was favored for physical relaxation as well as for soothing the body's pains.

Native Americans have used the peace pipe in various ways and on many occasions: to finalize treaties and agreements; to prepare for battle; as rites of passage to manhood; at funerals; and by religious leaders (shamans) for purification. The first pictorial record of smoking was found in excavations of pottery dating from 600-1000 A.D. at Uaxactlun, Guatemala. A Mayan is depicted smoking a type of rolled cigar tied with a string. Smoking occurred for such sacred purposes as enhancing fertility, predicting weather, conducting war councils, and enabling vision quests.<sup>vii</sup>

Some Native Americans consider tobacco to be a gift from and a vehicle for communicating with the spirit world. Tobacco went beyond being a ceremonial substance and was a source of enjoyment and a commodity for exchange among the indigenous peoples. Customs varied, but tobacco was used as a mutually pleasurable experience generally by men rather than by women. Excavated mounds yield remnants of smoking pipes indicating that pre-historic natives used tobacco extensively in social as well as ceremonial life. By dating clay pipes and other sources, archaeologists have determined

that tobacco was used for thousand of years and in a variety of forms throughout the Americas.<sup>viii</sup>

Tobacco's popularity became a part of long-established Native American trade, finding its way into far-flung non-growing tribal regions. In 1535 Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) met Native Americans on the island of Montreal using tobacco. Was this widespread use also subject to misuse and overuse? Were the indigenous peoples immune from such excessive practices? We have no records much less information as to health effects for people who lived in pre-Columbus times. As with many pre-twentieth century people, shorter life spans could be due to a multitude of deadly diseases that are now treatable and controlled. Generally popular use leads to misuse, and early users were susceptible to this.

Our family conception as tobacco growers was that the Indian peace pipe was a historic justification for use of tobacco for beneficial purposes. Within our family we were interested in history. Daddy was mentally alert though of limited education; among his accomplishments he spent his winters and free time in retirement reading and completed quite a number of history books. At an early age I would discuss geography, history and current events with him and we talked as though both were eager learners, for we and all our family valued education highly. Immediately after the start of the Second World War, though a third grader, I followed the battles of Tobruk in Africa and Bataan and Corregidor in the Philippines, learning to read newspapers on a daily basis. We listened each evening to the radio for news and regarded this war as a monumental event; we knew that we were immersed in a period of historic change. Later generations may not appreciate how uncertain we were in the early stages of that war as to whether there would be a successful outcome. However, we were unaware that the burley tobacco economy had some of the same trappings of uncertainty.

As a family we were surrounded by history, for our property was part of a former estate of a Virginian ex-Revolutionary War General Henry Lee, whose homestead was less than a mile away. Old Washington, where many pioneer and Civil War connections existed, was also a mile away to the west. Likewise we lived almost within sight of a "pre-historic" mound near Lewisburg on the Fleming Road.

I add quotes because the dirt mound was an ancient artifact of the Adena or Hopewell people, used most likely as a decorative ornament. Earlier in the twentieth century experts had excavated the site but found no artifacts. We heard and saw pictures of strange petroglyphs on the native rock formations in the hills to the southeast. We knew that within an hour's drive was "Old Indian Fields" in nearby Clark County; it is regarded as one of the last permanent Indian settlements in our region, for Kentucky was mostly devoid of Native American settlement and was considered a game

reserve by the neighboring Indian nations (Cherokee and Shawnee) -- for it teemed with many types of wildlife. Native Americans often of mixed ancestry have lived in Kentucky after the white settlement, and their numbers were often greater than the censuses of those periods indicated -- for many hid their ancestral roots. That was to change in part due to the patriotic deeds of Native Americans in the Second World War and further changes during the civil rights movement's growing respect for all American minorities.

In my early years we had few Indians as acquaintances. However, we knew one Native American day laborer, Tony, who stayed during harvest periods with neighbors and then would disappear for the rest of the year. At the time hemp was raised as a patriotic practice during the Second World War; Tony was employed in that difficult crop in its pre-mechanized stage. We never questioned whether Tony, or other Native Americans or any group of people would misuse tobacco.

Using tobacco was considered a pleasurable experience. We would excuse the "tobacco cough" some smokers had as a minor malady. More often substance abuse was associated with alcohol and stronger drugs. On the other hand, tobacco was associated with the production of contentment and the exhilarating feeling that it produced contributed to the euphoria of concluded treaties and agreements benefiting all parties. The breaking of these treaties and the resulting condition of Native Americans were beyond the horizon of that early awareness; tobacco triggered success in Indian-European-American affairs -- and that was sufficient to confirm tobacco's historic benefits.

#### Early English Settlements

On Sunday afternoons we would drive up to neighboring Fleming County to visit Great Aunt Mary and Uncle Joe. They had a tobacco farm near Johnson Station on the L&N Railroad. Their house was a large, mostly unused antebellum homestead, with a history written about its early inhabitants, the Bruce family. In this large antebellum house my mother was born in 1910. As kids we would explore the house going through unused bedrooms and to the backyard slave quarters. We were even daring enough to venture into the cellar areas with bars on the windows and a long bar where slaves were chained at night to keep them from escaping across the Ohio. Here in those dank spaces the romantic South faded into a stark reality. My attitudes were ambivalent, for love of South clashed head on with a strong dislike of slavery -- all wrapped together in Stephen Foster's "Old Black Joe."

Another phase of the historic tobacco pleasure myth came with the arrival of the English at Jamestown, and required a venture back into tobacco plantation history. If tobacco was pleasurable,