



North Coast Physician

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Cover Photo

“ZONES OF LIGHT”
Michael Fratkin, M.D.

The Editorial and Publications Committee encourages our member’s comments for publication.

Please submit electronically prior to the 15th of the month preceding publication.
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TOBACCO: A REMINISCENCE

Luther F. Cobb, M.D.



My father was born in 1925, and raised on a farm in the tiny town of Keo, Arkansas, really just a wide spot in the road with a cotton gin. My mother was born in 1926 and raised on a small farm in the small town of Smithville, Tennessee. It was a different time, one that is long gone in this country. At the turn of the 19th century, the vast majority of Americans lived on farms. That pattern began to change with the involvement of the USA in The Great War, as it was known then. My mother's father, Luther Leonidas Fuson (after whom I was named), was born in 1891 and as far as I know had never left the county of his birth until he was sent off to fight the Kaiser. He grew up on a small farm on Holmes's Creek, a tributary of the Caney Fork River a spot which is now far under the waters of Center Hill Lake. It was very deep in the Cumberland Mountains, and a place where there was no electricity or running water until the dam was built in the 1940's as part of the TVA system.

After his tour of duty in France with the 334th Machine Gun Battalion, during which he spent 56 consecutive days on the front lines, he returned to Smithville and determined he was going to make something useful of his life, having been spared the fate of many of his comrades. He got married, and was the first of his family of nine (two of whom died, unnamed, in infancy) to attend college. He attended what was then the State Normal School in Murfreesboro, two counties away, now Middle Tennessee State University. He paid his tuition (which I seem to recall was \$50 a year) by getting up at 3 AM to milk cows, before walking to the campus for his classes.

After getting his degree, he spent the remainder of his career as a teacher, ascending to being a principal in the local school system. His wife, my grandmother Pearl Fuson, was also a lifelong teacher. She finally got her college degree from Tennessee Tech at age 54.

Even though they had employment, that did not mean that times were simple or easy. Most families at the time had at least a small farm holding where they could raise most of the food they needed for the year. He had a 7 acre farm, with a garden for food, several parcels where he grew corn for his livestock (mainly hogs), and a tobacco base (patch). What crops could be saved for the winter were canned by my grandmother in old fashioned Mason jars and kept in a pantry



under a staircase.

Tobacco base was the term for the allotment granted each smallholding farmer to grow the cash crop for which there was always a market: tobacco. It is often forgotten that tobacco was the most important crop of the early American colonies, only much later to be supplanted by King Cotton, which is a different story. But one could always get some "cash money" for a tobacco crop, which was useful to buy the things they couldn't make in the shop or raise on the farm. In fact, during the Depression, county employees

like my grandparents weren't paid in cash, as there were no tax funds available. They continued to be employed, but were paid in "warrants", which was essentially a governmental promissory note. If one had connections, the warrant could be sold to a banker or someone else with money, usually at a very steep discount, which made the tobacco patch all the more valuable.

Each farmer was allotted a specific acreage for the production of tobacco from the Federal crop support system. It is a common misconception that the government actually paid for tobacco at a specified minimum price if it was not bought by one of the tobacco manufacturing companies.

The system was simpler than that. The program controlled the amount produced by limiting the acreage that could be placed into production, leaving it up to the individual farmer to optimize his crop yield. An agent would come out from the county agricultural bureau to measure the field and calculate its size. If it was too small, that was the farmer's tough luck. If it was too large, the farmer had to chop down the excess plants in view of the agent, and this was done when the crop was very young so that the small plants were of no commercial value.

In the case of the two years when I was the proprietor of the crop, the allowance was 0.58 and 0.62 acres. In later years, the system was simplified and the allowance was just a specific acreage based on historic amounts of production, which saved a lot of field time for the county agricultural agents.

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Tobacco is an amazing plant, despite the evil it generates. It is not planted as a seed in the field, but rather is sown in what is called a tobacco bed, where the tiny seedlings first develop. The seeds themselves are about the size of a poppy seed, and planting them directly would not work well. The seeds are planted in a small seedbed early in the spring, very close together, then after a few weeks uprooted to be planted in the field where they will grow to maturity. When the seedlings are planted, usually around early April, they are about 6 inches high. By the end of the summer, the plant would grow to be higher than six feet with a stem that was quite woody and as thick as one's forearm. The leaves at the bottom of the plant are huge, up to four feet long and two feet wide. Each plant has leaves every couple of inches up the stem all the way to the top.

Speaking of the top, it is necessary to cut the flower from the top of the plant if it is going to put maximum metabolic energy into the production of leaves. If the plant is allowed to flower, then it will wither and the leaves are not useful. So when they start to flower the farmer must walk through the field and cut the flower out of the top. That is a messy business, since the leaves are covered with fine hairs which produce a gummy resin, the source of the nicotine which is the desired product of the plant. And it is very, very sticky and hard to get off of the skin, so one has to wear long pants or jeans, long sleeved shirts, a bandanna around the neck, and gloves. A hat is necessary to shade from the sun, all of which makes this a very hot and unpleasant task in the 95 degree heat and 95% humidity typical of the Tennessee summers.

To make things worse, once the apical bud is cut out, the plant retaliates by forming axillary buds between each leaf and the stem, and these "suckers" will form flowers and sap the strength of the plant just as an apical bud would, so they have to be cut or

torn out from the axillary leaf angle. So instead of having just one flower, there can be dozens on each plant. As a result, there are two or three rounds of "suckering" to keep the energy of the plant committed to production of leaves. And again, it is hot, unpleasant, miserable work.

Speaking of buds, there is a caterpillar called a "budworm" that can attack the young and tender plant when it is just transplanted; if the bud is cut out by the insect at that point, the plant is stunted and useless. So it is necessary to put an insecticide on each plant. The agent we used for that, believe it or not, was lead arsenate. Toxic stuff indeed, and no doubt there was residual in the grown plant. To apply it, my grandfather fashioned a device (which I don't think was his invention, it was probably pretty traditional). This consisted of a round coffee can attached to a stick with wood screws, and several holes punched in the bottom of the can. The lead arsenate came in a sack from the agricultural supply store which looked a lot like a traditional flour sack. In fact, it was tinted pink so that it could not be incorporated into baked goods by mistake, or on purpose by a stealthy poisoner. Apparently there were cases in the past where it had been used in just that fashion, aided by the fact that the lead tastes sweet and the arsenate has a subtle garlicky taste that can be easily masked. We would pour the powder into the can and shake it through the holes over each small plant. I remember vividly the sweet odor of the dust as it would waft up in the air as I walked down the rows of tobacco. Of course this was in pre-OSHA days, which probably would not have pertained to a family farm operation in any case.

Later in the summer we sprayed on another pesticide, the name of which I forget, but there were still pests on the crop, which had to be picked off by hand. The principal offenders were grasshoppers,

which were hard to fend off, and a slow moving very large caterpillar called the tobacco hornworm, which is actually the larva of the sphinx moth; it also predated on tomatoes and other nightshade family plants. It is a large green caterpillar that can be longer than a finger. We used to toss them over the fence into the adjacent chicken yard, where the hens would take them into custody, as it were. The hornworms are harmless, but I used to just hate handling them, as they have what I would describe as an icky feeling. In the days before pesticides they used to be very common, but were less so in the age of better living through chemistry. And of course, I would expect residual pesticide in the final product, which of course was not subject to any kind of inspection, unlike any other agricultural product.

Once the plants were in the ground, they had to be watered frequently and plowed several times to aerate the soil so that the plants could gain access to nutrients in the soil. Watering was easy in my grandfather's tobacco field as the upper part was just a little bit higher than the lower so that there was a gradient down which the water could flow. It was only necessary to put a garden hose at the top of the rows and switch it to the next one over after a few minutes, one of the easiest tasks. Plowing was something else. My grandfather had a mare named Kit, whom we used for all kinds of motive power around the farm. There were several different models of plow that were used in various fields, but the one for the tobacco field had three steel plowshares arranged in an oblique row so that it would throw the soil toward the plants, and leave a furrow between. Each row would have to be plowed in two directions to accomplish this. Plowing the field, even though it was not much more than a half acre, could take a half day easily. Fortunately it was pretty easy to learn how to do it, mainly I think because the horse knew a lot more about what

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she was doing than I did, at least at first. It was an interesting feeling to walk behind the horse and plow barefoot, an experience that I would imagine not a lot of currently practicing surgeons in California have had.

I grew up as the second son in a family of six brothers. The way it worked was that the proprietor of the crop, in essence a traditional sharecropping arrangement, was the eldest boy that was not yet in college. All the other brothers, plus my parents and grandparents, and my aunts and uncles if they were there as they usually were, would pitch in to help with the planting of the crop and the harvest. In fact, the local neighbors would also come over and help with those two tasks, refusing any compensation except having meals with us. It was a close knit community indeed. But the main proprietor would spend the summer on the farm and do all the rest of the work. It is an excellent way to learn what hard work is, as it was the hardest work I have ever done. The idea was that it would serve as the nucleus of our college fund, which indeed it was. A whole summer's effort could net one of us close to \$2000, which was a fortune to me at the time

Harvesting the tobacco was another pretty arduous task. Usually in August or early September, the plants were cut with an axe or other sharp instrument (my favorite was a meat cleaver, which had a more generous margin for error on the cutting stroke). The method was to bend the plant over to put some stress on the stem, then to cut it with a single stroke. The plant was then handed to another worker, usually a brother, who would "spike" the plant onto a wooden stake. This was accomplished with a razor sharp metal cone that would fit over the five foot long tobacco stick, five plants to a stick so that they would not overlap too much which would risk the leaves rotting. It was easy to spike oneself if not careful, as I did a few times. We tried not to knock leaves off

of the stalk, as those would have to be picked up and "strung" in the barn individually onto a wire, which was a lot more work. When we had a full load of spiked sticks, one of us would drive a homemade wagon (fashioned on the wheelbed of an old Ford truck) pulled by faithful old Kit. It had a rack where the sticks could be loaded, then we would pull it into the tobacco barn and one of us would stand on the rack of the wagon and hand the individual sticks up to the rafters in the barn, where they would hang until they had dried, or "cured", sufficiently.

The final step in preparation would be to strip the leaves from the stalks and arrange them together into what was called "hands", which were bundles of individual leaves. This was done on a foggy day usually in November when the leaves were sufficiently dry, using the moisture of the fog to keep them from crumbling in our hands. We tried to keep separate the leaves from the base, middle, and upper part of the plant, as they were in decreasing order of desirability (hence price) as the leaves got higher and smaller on the plant. Finally, the hands would be bundled together in a bale, which looked a lot like a cotton bale except it was brown instead of white. A good harvest would give a half dozen bales per crop. A lot of work for a small product. The crop would then be hauled to a tobacco warehouse, where it would be sold in an auction that took only a few seconds as the buyers walked down the rows of tobacco and conferred with the auctioneer in an impenetrable argot. I guess that is what auctioneers are supposed to do, but it was amazingly brief.

The final act of the season would be to clean out Kit's stable and spread the manure over the field as a fertilizer for the next year's crop. I always used an old pair of sneakers for that task, as they were useless for anything else after that.

I learned a lot from my grandfather, not only in the experience of working on his farm, but with many other episodes in my life. We had a kind of a special relationship as I was

named for him, which in the South is a bond. He was a major influence on my life, and I was very pleased that he lived long enough to see me graduate from medical school; he died the following year at 87 years of age, despite being a smoker most of his life and having been gassed with chlorine while on the Western Front. I still think of him often, and I have his (dented) doughboy helmet from his WWI days in my closet to remind me of his military service.

Since then, tobacco has pretty much ceased to be the small farmers' cash crop. It used to be that on driving the 60 miles from our family home to the farm that we could have a contest as to who could see the most 'bacca patches on the way up. Now, they are seldom seen. Part of this is of course the fact that small farming is a dying way of life, partly because the price per pound is not much higher than it was in the 1960's (when gasoline was around 30 cents a gallon), so the utility of the money is just not sufficient recompense for the effort, and partly because in lieu of the positive role tobacco was thought to play in history and society, it is now much more disreputable. As it should be, of course, given all the harm it has done over the years to hundreds of millions.

Still, it taught me a lot, and I'm glad to have had the experience. §

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