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This short documentary shows the process of harvesting, curing, and selling tobacco, from farm to auction. Filmed at Duke Homestead State Historic Site in Durham, North Carolina, during the 2009 Tobacco Harvest Festival.

**Video:**  Harvesting and selling tobacco

**Transcript:**

### *Video Transcript*

Narrator (00:03)

Tobacco is important for North Carolina because it historically has been and it still remains the number-one cash crop for the state. And it's a way that many families have made money to live off of. Tobacco seed is very tiny, and so tobacco farmers historically would scatter the seeds in a seed bed in the ground around mid-April, and they would let those seedlings grow until they were about six inches tall. When the tobacco had reached this height, they would then transplant the tobacco into rows in the fields. In this area they usually transplant tobacco around the first week in May.

(00:40)

Tobacco flowers are very pretty, but tobacco farmers don't want them on the plant. Tobacco flowers draw the energy away from the leaves in the tobacco plant because they want to make seeds to reproduce the plant for another year. Since tobacco farmers want big, healthy leaves, they "top" the plant, and that's what they call taking the flower off the top of the plant, so that all the plant's energy will go into the leaves.

(01:07)

Horn worms are a major pest of the tobacco plant. Horn worms are a caterpillar, but in their caterpillar stage they are voracious eaters, and they can eat at least a leaf of tobacco a day each. Historically the way that farmers would remove these from the plants is they would just physically pick them off the plant, and then they would kill them.

(01:26)

Around the time of harvest a brightleaf tobacco plant can reach about five feet tall, and it grows on one main stalk. They'd start harvesting tobacco in late July or early August. They'd harvest through the end of summer and into early fall. The way they harvest the plants is they take the leaves as they ripen, or as they yellow, grab the stem closest to the plant, and with a little bit of a twist, you can pull it off of the main stalk of the plant. Then the farmer would tuck the leaf under their arm. When their arm was filled with so many leaves they couldn't stick another one under there, they would bring it over to a tobacco drag. Basically it looks like a wooden trailer on sled runners that would be pulled by a mule.

Ronald "Tash" Hudson (02:13)

What the people in the South have found out, mules were more adaptable to a hot climate. They have long ears that help to get rid of the heat, and their nature just seems to suit a southern, because you can go to places up north and they don't use mules very often.

(02:28)

Now a mule is what we call a hybrid. They are not a true breed. And not being a true breed they cannot reproduce themselves and have offsprings. But they are a result of a donkey, which is what we call a jack, that is the male. And then the female is a horse. When you breed them, you get a mule. If you use a jenny, which is a female donkey, and a male horse, or a pony, you get what we call a "mulie" or "henny," which a lot of people say they can tell by looking at them, but it's a little hard to tell the difference unless you really know them.

(03:16)

The mule skinner is an old terminology, where, when a man would work four or five mules, he normally had a long whip, and that whip he'd crack it and use it to make them go forward or go "gee" which would be to the right, or "haw," which would be to the left. And that's where the muleskinner come in. But a real good muleskinner never did hit his mules, he might flick it at them, and just let it touch them real easy, but, you know, you're damaging a valuable piece of property if you just beat them.

Narrator (03:48)

Once the entire drag was filled, the mule would bring it up the the curing barn.

Olivia Bottoms (04:13)

In Eastern North Carolina we called it looping tobacco, I think in the Piedmont it was called stringing. You would put anywhere from about thirty-six, thirty-eight bundles of tobacco on a stick. You'd have two, three handers, depending on how many the looper could take. Take about 500 sticks to go into a barn a day. You'd have sometimes two loopers at a truck. You'd get three leaves, usually, of big tobacco pieces, and the reason was so they would counterset each other so the heat could get up between the green leaves in the barn as it would dry, it'd take about

five days to dry out a barn of tobacco.

(05:07)

When you're drying your tobacco out, you start off with fairly low heat, and then gradually raise the heat of the tobacco. As the leaf turns yellow, you keep increasing your heat until you get it at a hot enough temperature to actually dry it golden color. In this area of North Carolina, and Eastern North Carolina, we called it brightleaf because it was a gold color.

(05:39)

What you're doing is you're putting a loop around each bundle of tobacco that goes on the stick so that as the leaf dried, the string would tighten up and the leaves would not fall out in the barn and cause a fire. You did this all day long till you got your tobacco, 500 sticks. If the handers would hand it by the top, it's easier for the loopers to get, to catch the bundle, and then her stems would all be the same length on the stick, making for a neater stick of tobacco, prettier looking, but it also made it easier to take it off once the tobacco was dried out, because as you took the bundles off, they would be even and lay it over for someone to grade.

Thomas Ellis (06:31)

Now we are in the process of grading tobacco, and we're tying it in bundles getting it ready to take to the market. And once we get this done, we'll sell it, and we'll take whatever the buyers give us for it. When we grade tobacco, this would be what we would call the best grade. And then you'd have tobacco similar to this. And the best grade would be between these two sticks, then we'd put the next grade, which would be a little different in color, a little different in texture there, and on down until we get to the trash, and the trash would go over there between those two sticks. And that's what grading tobacco is: You just pick it out and put the texture, the quality, and the looks of it in one grade, and the rest of it goes in a different grade.

B. W. Crabtree (07:33)

The process of tying it into the hand, you'd take these, after they'd been graded, you'd pick out the leaves and put it in a bundle like this. Then you'd get another leaf like this and lay it on your knee, fold it like this, and then start wrapping it around, wrapping it around like this. And just wrap it around, roll it around and then you'd come through here like this do this and then you've got your finished product. This is what it looks like when you're preparing it to be taken to the market.

Thomas Ellis (08:20)

Then we would get it to the market, we would pack it on baskets like that basket right there, and then we'd take in and mash the tails of it together, and the heads would kind of be out like this, they would fit around the basket and the pile would be round, and that's why the tails were mashed together. Then we'd put it on the basket and take it to the floor and on the warehouse and there we'd wait for the government grader or tobacco buyers to come through and tell us what they're going to give for it. We was at their mercy. Whatever they tell us they could give, that's what we have to take. If no one else didn't want it, you couldn't eat it, so you had to sell it.

(08:59)

[Auctioneer]

Page S. Roberts (09:08)

This all started back in the middle 1800s when a man from Danville found out that he did not have to go out on the street and call up a group of people to sell it like personal property. They'd have a hogshead of tobacco and they'd ring the bell and they'd start that up and they'd sell it like asking for a bid like "fifty, say will you go sixty? Fifty will you go sixty?" So if he decided that if he could line tobacco up in a warehouse and he could have the professional buyers come that he could sell that tobacco faster, with more rhythm, and for more money. Thus it was started then.

(09:50)

My father used to ride me around when I was a teenager on a Sunday or something, and he was an auctioneer. I had a brother who was an auctioneer also, but he would get me to sing out the numbers, I had no idea I'd ever be an auctioneer. And I wanted to do it fast, and he said don't worry about that, learn to adjust your chant to the situation -- the tobacco sale itself. You'll have some sales that are really hard, you'll have some that would be easy. And so, that's what I did, I started to sing them out, you know, "One-eighty-one, one" -- sorry, my throat's bothering me a little -- "One-eighty-two-two-two-ree. Eighty-ree-ree-four-four. Eighty-four-four-four. American."

(10:41)

Now if you did that in the chant form you would probably: [does chant form]. And that's the way it would sound on the floor. When they lined that tobacco up, it's all, it was all graded, when I was in the business, by the government which had a support price on it. The warehouseman, who would take in the farmer's tobacco, was paid on commission. And they in turn paid us on commission, or by poundage, whichever we could trade with them about. And he would start the sale, and when he would start the sale the auctioneer starts his chant with that amount of money. [Auction in progress] We look across the row, and if a man's looking at us, he's stood to bid. If another one looks up or touches himself, that's sixty-one. If they go like this [holds up four fingers], that would be sixty-four. Then if somebody hits him a lick, that would be sixty-five. Then he might jump at another four, that would be sixty-nine. A dollar sixty-nine.

(11:52)

It was every man for himself, this man wanted to out-buy the other one, and he would do everything in his power to do that. Some of them would flip a cigarette to see -- they didn't want him to know who was bidding because they would know what that man had, the amount of money on a pile of tobacco also. Nobody would be looking at us, at this point, we knocked it. And then the ticket marker would put that price on that ticket. The buyer himself would holler out a grade, he'd put that on there. Now we're moving at five to six hundred piles an hour, so you can imagine those tickets are in the air.

Page S. Roberts (12:33)

It was a wonderful old business, it was a way of life. And when you had a good sale, it was like hitting a home run in

baseball. The farmers were happy, the warehousemen were happy, and we were happy.  
(12:52)  
[John Dee Holeman singing "I Feel So Good"]

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