

Kathleen Martin (her daughter Drew is present)

July 2, 2014

Born in 1962

52 years old

Windsor, CT

29:31

Shade tobacco started with my grandfather back in the late 30's. Hubble Brown. He grew for another grower and his first year I believe was in 1938 which happened to be the hurricane of 38. He grew a crop, it was all in the shed, and then they had the hurricane and they lost it. You are a farmer and you are tenacious and you do it again the next year. So the early shade was developed over the years. The 50's and 60's and onward it grew for our farm. I worked mainly in the 70's onward. That was the summer job for teens getting out of school. 14, 15, 16. Typically the girls would work in the sheds and the boys would work in the field picking the tobacco. It would start right when school got out with tying and wrapping. And on days like today when it got into the 80's it would be very hot we'd get out early and everyone slows down to nothing so it gets more expensive to get the job done. In the 70's and 80's we leased more land in the area and we got up to a few 100 acres recently.

3:00 The big thing when you were little was that my grandfather and when my father was the field boss and he had his pickup truck. But the big thing was when grandpa came around and he drove around in a great big boat of a Cadillac. So if you could go make the rounds with grandpa that was a special thing. So if you were around when grandpa pulled in the drive way you got to go around with him. The thing with tobacco is you have check your fields all the time. Watching the growth. Then stopping in the sheds and watch the girls sewing. My great Aunt was a shed boss. Monitoring how the shed was run and the leaves getting hung. Aunt Charlotte. She was great. And there were other shed bosses as well.

4:35 I picked for fun but not for a day. I didn't do any suckering but the tying, the wrapping, I was a shed boss since I was 17, teaching the sewers. I sewed for three years. I was Lori's leafer. It is an important job. You don't want the sewer to run out of leaves in the middle of a lath. She has to get 48 leaves on if she runs out of leaves or they are not in the right place you miss it. So when you are a good sewer you are a perfectionist and you want it done just right, and if you have a lousy leafer who is not paying attention and is chatting with the person next to her. (Two leaves at one time.) You are thinking how quickly can I tie this and get to the next one. You'd have a partner. So your partner, if you are good workers you would compete with each other and try and get your carriage down on the next one before your partner. If you miss a leaf, that does happen, in the afternoon the leaves wilt down a little bit and they stick to each other and the machine is still going at the same pace and you don't want to stop, you can turn the machine on and off but that is a no no. You want to keep it going. You don't want to stop.

6:45 As a shed boss if it was 46, 47 or 48 you are happy but with people who are learning to do it you have to be more patient. But you need all the leaves on because you only have so many laths in a shed and you want that shed as full as possible because you have your overhead with heat from the stoves so you want your best production. After college I worked in a bank and I hated it, especially once the summer comes again because you miss it. So as the farm grew there were more things to do, in January

and Feb there isn't much to do. For a couple of years I got a part time job during the winter months. My dad worked with my grandfather and they were always in charge. Always conversing back and forth and making decisions together. My uncle, who you will be interviewing, he worked as a 14 year old and then during college and right after, he was in the service and then he got his degree and became a school teacher. So he had his summers off so he would come in and run the field. He would run the field crew with a couple of assistance and I was in the shed crew with a couple of assistance and we usually ran two sheds at a time unless it was a really big shed then you were in together and you'd split up the work crew. The machines and people working them would be my. It evolved.

9:45 Suckering is the hardest job because when the plants are small and low to the ground you have to be down on the ground either sitting or kneeling in the dirt. The tying was only difficult when it was hot days. Morning was a breeze but come closer to noon and the afternoons when it was in the 90's it got hotter. But you needed to get it done because as these hot days are coming you are susceptible to thunder storms that develop so you need to and keep them wrapped. And the wrapping is around the stalk as the plant grows and the plant grows a couple of inches a day sometimes. So you go through you tie and then you go through all the fields and wrap and then once you go through all the fields wrapped you go through and wrap again. That wire you tie it to is eye level for most people. When the leaves hit the wire you don't want to wrap it anymore till the plants are about 4 feet off the ground. By that time it is time to harvest. And then you are harvesting two or three leaves at a time. You start with what you planted first as they will be ready first. Then you pick through it is called first picking on the front end and then it turns into first priming on the cured end. First priming are the first leaves picked and cured and are the first leaves ready for sale. Not as valuable on the market because they tend to be smaller and lower to the ground so they are not the highest quality of the plant. But the second third and fourth are your prime pickings. That is when you want to make sure that the leaves are perfect, no bruises, no tears, they are handled so many times. It has to be a constant reminder.

12:49 As a shed supervisor you are watching how they are taking the baskets off of the trucks onto the conveyor not setting them down hard, not sending them down the belt so they are bumping into each other, then you watch the leafers take the pads out of the basket because that is another area when they can be bruised. They are picking them up by the thicker end of the stems and not the sides or the back and not squeezing them too hard or when they put the pad down they aren't pressing on them or sliding them across the sewers running out and you are sliding because the bottom leaves will rub and that will bruise them. As a supervisor in the shed I am constantly watching how the workers are handling the leaves, the sewers are picking them up. Because they could drop a lath on a pile so you want to make sure that the leafer isn't putting a pile down where the lath can drop on the table. So if they are in the machine you have the lath and string and if they pull the string too hard the lath drops on the table and if there is a pad of leaves there it will spear right through them. Leafers often forget and put a pad there so you have to keep reminding them that they can only have an extra pad on the left hand side not the right hand side.

15:10 It depends on the workers. If the workers are cooperative everyone is happy. If the worker is unhappy because they don't want to do the job, they don't like the job, their parent is making them work and they don't want to be there it is miserable for everybody. The other way they would be miserable is they would be slow producers. Lori and I like competing. If my partner didn't care they wouldn't compete with that energy.

16:30 What I thought about is this is the job that needs to be done how best can we do it. The type of workers you work with make a big difference so if the people want to be there and enjoy the job and enjoy working with each other it was great. It got difficult in the early mid-80's to get enough teenagers to work. Things started changing on that front in that kids didn't want to work or they had to stay home with younger siblings because the moms were working. And the other side of it too when the parents would pay the kids to stay home because they didn't want the kids to work tobacco because it was too hard. Mid June to that first week in September is when you need the most people and you need them every day 6 days a week. We went into the H2A program. You work with the government and put in a job order which was a request for a certain number of workers for a contracted period of time and you promise to pay them a certain pay rate, promise to house them for free, you promise to pay their transportation. It was almost like an insurance program for labor.

19:00 Most of the workers we brought in were Jamaican but there was a few years where they came from Mexico. The good thing about the program was that you could request the same workers back again if they wanted to come back and work for you and you wanted them back you could put their name down and they sign up to work for you and you get them back again. We started the program in 88 and 89 and we ended when we cut back on shade we were able to just have local. So 2012 was our last year. We were up to 170 workers housed on site and more than that local. It was half and half. The good part was getting the same people back again so they knew you, you knew them they knew what was expected of them and you didn't have to go through that training. The local people come in if they work a day and if they come back the next day you are like ok. It was like a revolving door with the local people. You can't spend your 6-7 weeks of harvest hiring and training them. You want that consistency. The other thing is that if we had a storm in the night you don't want to pick the tobacco wet, it affects the curing, it is miserable to pick when it is wet, and it affects how it dries out so you want to wait till the leaves are dry to start picking. So if you had a rain storm at night and in the morning you couldn't start picking till 9-10 o'clock, the local people if we didn't have a job ready they either didn't show up or you'd try to find them some kind of a job whereas people on site are ready to work whenever so we would just work later.

21:45 We don't have any shade this year. We have broadleaf. We are still growing tobacco. Most production has been shade grown. Broadleaf is a totally different crop. I'd compare apples and oranges. Shade is unique to this climate and area because you have that CT River Valley between the long hot summer days the humidity the soils. The soil through the CT River Valley is perfect. Shade needs more attention, a lot more concern and worry. I grew up with it, When you get in and you are working with the people you are working with, I don't know, you are working 6 in the morning to 6 at night and if you are working with people who are good natured and want to do a good job it makes a very pleasurable work environment. And it smells so good. After the leaves are sewn, even when they are green they smell good. Broadleaf, you plant it, keep an eye on it and track the whole plant at once, whereas with Shade you check on it 6,7-8 times. You have to make sure the leaves are perfect. Not so fussy about the broadleaf and it doesn't smell as good because you cure it differently. You just dry it. It cures more on its own. The shade you have to baby it. Watch the leaves, check the temperature 4-5 times a day into the night the fires are on 24/7. The broadleaf you do not have to run unless there is a damp weather pattern.

25:20 Back when there were a lot of small family farms in the area the different farms would compete against each other in softball. Mostly the guys. The Browns against the Hendricks. Played down at

Dunham field. As a young child we would have super and then my dad would always go back to work until it got dark and part of his job was checking the sheds and so if we finished dinner in time and we wanted to ride with dad in the pick-up truck. We would always be playing. It was very sandy in the sheds so we would find toads and what have you as little kids. That was if Mom let us go with Dad after supper that was sort of a big thing. I am talking about when I was 4-5 years old. And then they don't allow this anymore but back in the 60's and 70's riding in the back of the pickups, no seat belts on benches. Bouncing around on the farm roads. That is where I learned how to drive. Driving the little tractors first. It is such a unique way of life. It's not a 9-5 job. This time of year you are working before sun up to after sun down. The other thing that is great about this crop too is that Even if you get tired of what you are doing you know that it will change in three or four weeks you will be on to another job and you'll be doing different things.

28:20 The Harvest time was really the big time. You have to get the crop in before a hail storm comes in or a thunder storm and blew it down. We've had everything, maybe not earth quakes, snow storms, wind storms, hail storms, tornados, hurricanes, heat waves, droughts, to too much rain. You have a week of rainy weather then the plant weakens and it is too muddy to get in the fields. Broad leaf is a little bit like hang it and forget it.