After Tobacco

After nearly exhausting his farm, one tobacco farmer finds support in the local community for diversified organic crops.

BY STEVE SMITH

When my high school sociology teacher asked me what I wanted to do for a living, I told him I wanted to farm. “Farm?” he replied. “Farming is for people who can’t do anything else!” Years later, the effects of this low opinion of farming are evident. Across the nation, small farms are vanishing. During the 1980s, 2000 family farms a week disappeared, replaced by subdivisions, strip malls, and highways.

Here in my home state of Kentucky, small farms are facing an even greater risk now as a result of the war over tobacco. Kentucky, which is the second largest producer of tobacco in the United States, faced 30-percent cuts in tobacco quotas in 1999 and declining tobacco prices. If Kentucky farmers are unable to diversify, their farms too will be swallowed up by development.

Changing Times

I know a great deal about the obstacles facing these farmers because I’ve lived and farmed in tobacco country all my life. I was born and raised on a small farm in Trimble County, where my family grew small crops of tobacco, corn, and hay. We ran a small dairy, raised hogs and chickens, and grew most of our own food from a big garden. As these garden crops became ripe, my family—along with several aunts and uncles, cousins, and neighbors—would come together to can them.

This was a time when children were useful, gathering in the corn and tomatoes, green beans, and cabbage; shucking the corn; washing the jars; and carrying the refuse back to the hogs. As children, we didn’t appreciate the work, but we liked feeling useful, and we liked the security of being together, of being united by important work. And we liked the tomato fights that began when our uncle Bill hurled the first rotten tomato at a slacker.

These were happy times. They reassured us that we belonged to each other and to the world and that life had meaning and purpose. They helped to create within me a love for farming and a wish to carry on this way of life.

Our lives were made richer and more complex by tobacco. Although I understood from the sermons on Sunday the moral complexities of tobacco, especially in terms of our relationship with the tobacco companies, our church offering came from tobacco money, and it was never refused. The pastor and the majority of the members were tobacco farmers, and the church we attended had been built with tobacco money.

During the 1970s, though, our community began to modernize, and I noticed that our way of life was considered old-fashioned. It did not bother me, I think, as much as it did my sisters, who seemed embarrassed at times by our homemade clothes and our homemade existence. We came to want things we saw on television: the new cars, appliances, and fancy clothes we’d never had, not realizing at the time that we were giving up self-sufficiency for consumerism.

Farming also began to change. Farmers were convinced to buy bigger tractors and equipment, more pesticides and fertilizers. Agribusiness corporations had learned from Madison Avenue and Hollywood how to embarrass the public into buying their goods. It was all very subtle, very seductive—and very effective.

After graduating from high school, my youngest sister left home for the big city. My parents began modernizing the house and farm.
We got rid of the dairy, hogs, and chickens because we could no longer compete with huge specialized operations. For some reason, canning days became fewer and fewer. Caught in the subtle, relentless pull toward modernization, we began to specialize in growing tobacco. Providing profits of around $2,000 an acre, tobacco was the one crop that paid enough to allow us to continue farming.

**Saving a Farm**

In November 1984, the day after Ronald Reagan was reelected, my grandfather passed away. I had farmed with him for as long as I could remember. He had passed on to me his memories of the Great Depression—the Hoover days—and of 6-cent-per-pound tobacco. Yet he often said to me, “It’s not me I worry about; it’s you.” Years later, I would know what he meant.

Because I was unable to get a loan to buy the farm—324 acres on the Little Kentucky River—my parents and I bought it in a partnership. Even though the farm had been in our family for years, it would once again have to pay for itself.

Interest rates were high—13.5 percent—and tobacco prices were at an all-time low, while the costs of production had nearly doubled. The only way to satisfy my creditors was to plant tobacco fencerow to fencerow on land that had once been hay fields and pasture for cattle, and if that didn’t bring enough profit, knock out the fencerows and plant more. It meant leasing tobacco allotments from other farmers for 65 cents a pound, and it meant not having enough suitable land to allow us to rest or rotate cropland. And it meant adapting to the new technologies of mass production and monoculture and borrowing large sums of money each spring for seed, fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides.

My hard beginning reminded me of my grandparents’, except that instead of mules and plows, I was armed with a technology that could do much greater damage. After a few years, the land began to give out. It had lost its fertility, and increasing amounts of fertilizers and chemicals were needed to offset the effects of continuous monoculture. Keeping up in the new economy meant adapting to new technologies. As Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz put it, farmers had to “get big or get out.”

At the same time, I maintained a 2-acre truck garden that also had been losing money since I started it five years earlier. It was my hope that, by some miracle, vegetable farming could help me get where I wanted to be—not back to the garden of Eden but back to the garden of my childhood, to canning days, to the smell of tomatoes cooking, to some kind of meaningful existence.

Although I never made any money with conventional produce like tomatoes or sweet corn, I did learn some valuable lessons about the food industry. For example, the market paying the highest rates for produce is always one or two hundred miles north. Southern farmers have a short marketing window to get their loads to a northern market. When produce begins to flood that market, farmers must look further north. The loads have to be big to justify the expense of the trips, but at the same time, the huge volume of produce being dumped on the market drives the price down. In the end, farmers cut their own throats.

Farmers are also forever competing with other farmers to see who can produce crops the cheapest. They must work cheap and farm cheap, replacing labor with a weekly spray schedule of pesticides and fungicides. They must select varieties on the basis of what trucks will load fresh, rather than on the actual quality of the product. And they never meet their real customers, the people who buy their food.

What I had hoped to be a solution—an alternative to tobacco farming—turned out to be more of the same, only worse. Tobacco I knew. Marketing tobacco tended to be a fairly straightforward, stable process, despite annual fluctuations in prices. But marketing produce seemed to be done with smoke and mirrors. Whether or not conventional farming could be made to work, I didn’t know and no longer cared—I was done with it.

**Sharing the Harvest**

I had grown used to spending my winters beside the wood stove reading everything I could find about farming. A friend who had been watching me struggle with vegetable farming gave me a book, *The New Organic Grower* by Elliot Coleman.

Coleman clearly spelled out the principles necessary for successful farming, the same principles I had learned subconsciously in my childhood: sustainability, soil health, diversification versus specialization, animal husbandry, marketing, craftsmanship, crop rotations. If Coleman was right, my experience and frustration with vegetable farming, which had seemed to make no sense, now made perfect sense. I needed to remember what I already knew—that farming was both cultural and biological. I needed to relearn the basic principles of good farming.

In his chapter on marketing, Coleman writes about food guilds or cooperatives that were catching
on across the country. Cooperatives are farmer-owned enterprises that allow members to purchase shares in the season’s crop. In exchange for a membership fee, members enjoy a steady supply of fresh, organic, local produce at lower-than-market prices. Farmers are guaranteed a market for their crops and can concentrate on what they do best: farming.

Cooperatives are not a new idea. The Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative was created in 1941 with a similar purpose: to provide growers with a sure market for their crops and prevent the overproduction of tobacco. It made sense to me that the wisdom behind the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-op was the only answer to farmers’ wholly natural tendency to overproduce.

And so, in the winter of 1989, I began planning an organic food cooperative that would feed 40 families for a season. I would extend the summer growing season into spring and fall by using a greenhouse for early and late plantings and by storing produce in a root cellar. I built the greenhouse and root cellar and planted three and a half acres of about 30 different varieties of vegetables, everything from asparagus to zucchini.

When these garden crops became ripe, I was still unable to find customers or shareholders in my co-op, so I sent a letter to the Louisville Courier Journal explaining what I was doing. An interested reporter published an article on my venture in the Sunday paper, including my phone number. By the end of the day, I had 40 customers and about 100 more on a waiting list.

That was nine years ago. Now our little three-and-a-half-acre community-supported produce business feeds about 85 to 90 families each year. Shareholders in the co-op pay $425 a year for a half-bushel of in-season, chemical-free produce each week from April to December. It grosses about $10,000 an acre. Using sustainable resources that are available from the farm, such as compost and manure, to replace commercial fertilizers, and appropriate, small-scale technology that was once common on traditional hill farms 50 years ago, our farm nets about $6,000 an acre.

But economically conservative farming techniques are only half the reason that our profits are fair; the other half of the equation is the cooperation of our shareholders. It has been a most pleasant surprise to discover that my customers enjoy knowing their farmers, having some measure of control over where and how their food is grown, and establishing ties with the land and people who care for the land.

We have an annual farm-day picnic for our customers. But they are more than customers really. They know that industrialized farming was a bad idea and would like to be part of the solution. The solution, of course, involves communication and human relationships. Generosity and a mutual concern for our well-being—not market forces—become a driving force that allows us to practice better farming methods.

**Snake Oil and Hucksters**

I do not mean to suggest that my experience offers an alternative for all tobacco farmers who may be faced with economic challenges in the next few years. But I do believe that it is helpful in understanding the problems tobacco farmers, as well as produce farmers, are having.

First, farmers and consumers are totally isolated from each other. Second, all real decision making in mainstream agriculture has been forfeited to Big Business. And third, specialization has forced farmers to rely primarily on one crop—in my section of the country it is tobacco—to ensure a profit. Had we farmers kept our various other farm enterprises—dairies, vineyards, orchards, gardens, and flocks—we would be much better equipped to handle the tobacco problem. Had these so-called minor enterprises been given half the research and development dollars they deserved, the problem might have been avoided altogether. But instead, farmers were advised by colleges of agriculture to run their farms like a factory, to streamline, modernize, and specialize in order to boost profits and survive in the new farm economy. Those farmers who have survived are now unprepared to face a future without tobacco.

The question raised by the public consistently throughout the debate over the fate of tobacco farming has been: why can’t tobacco farmers in the Southeast grow something else, as farmers in other parts of the country are doing? But this question ignores the problems that farmers in other parts of the country are having and causing. They are already producing themselves out of a job, and they don’t need several thousand more farmers dumping further surpluses on their already-depressed markets.

A better question might be: why shouldn’t farmers be encouraged and supported in their efforts to produce quality food for local markets? The food industry has treated farmers far worse than the tobacco industry has. There is a perfectly good reason tobacco farmers are unwilling, in fact unable, to abandon a crop that offers them collective bargaining, management of the supply, and a stable selling market. Why would they want to jump into
a so-called free market that offers them no help or protection at all? As the renowned economist John Kenneth Galbraith put it:

Those who affirm the beneficence of the free market for agriculture are, as regards the industrially developed countries, speaking of something that does not exist...[I]t does not exist because left to market forces, agriculture has a relentless, totally normal tendency to overproduce...[T]his has been the source of a persistent pressure of supply on price. But that is not all. Uniquely, or nearly so in the modern economy, the individual farmer has no influence or control over the supply and price of what he produces. The individual farmer is one among thousands and tens of thousands responding to a market price and situation on which not even the production decisions of the largest individual operator have any appreciable effect.¹

In the first year of the co-op, one of the members gave me another book that helped me put my own experience into perspective: The Unsettling of America by Wendell Berry. As I read it, I was amazed by how my own experience seemed to confirm what Berry was saying. He spoke of how industry had been given an unfair advantage in agriculture, of how money and politics contributed to the mass exodus of farm people, and of how these former farmers were considered by industrialists to make the best factory workers. He also mentioned how the hucksters and snake-oil salesmen of the past were still with us. Having gone to school and gone high-tech, they are now considered experts on agriculture. This explanation gave me a better understanding of what was happening to my farm and a means to do something about it.

If the American public honestly believed that pig factories, chicken factories, and produce factories are viable alternatives for tobacco farmers, this would be great cause for alarm. Fortunately, because of my experience that fateful Sunday morning when hundreds of people offered their help to a tobacco farmer, I have reason to believe that the American public has better sense. We may still reclaim our decision-making ability from industry.

As Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

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