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Tobacco Market

By Joseph Mitchell

About the middle of August drowsy people in towns along the North and South Carolina state lines are awakened by heavy wagons rumbling through the streets; the tobacco farmers are arriving from all over the county, getting in town early to try for the best places on the auction floors. The wagons are loaded down and the tobacco leaves are covered with burlap sacks sewed together or with bedquilts in crazy designs. People walking along the street can smell the raw tobacco. The smell begins to twine around everything it touches.

Tobacco farmers do not have a soft life. Right after Christmas the work starts, and from about the middle of July until the last of August the job is hard. This is when the tobacco plants begin to yellow and ripen under the sun, and the farmers start getting the crop out of the fields and into the curing barns, stringing it on sticks and hanging it up on rows of poles socketed in the wall above adobe furnaces. After working all day men must stay about the barn at night attending to the fires and watching the thermometer. They go for weeks under a heavy strain, sleeping very little. But around the barn at night the air cools off with the dew and the Negroes begin to pick at battered banjos and sing tired little songs. People stretch out on the ground, regard the stars and scratch themselves like coon dogs. They talk and eat watermelons and pray to God.

When the leaves are cured to a dark yellow or light brown color they are taken out of the barn and unstrung from the sticks, then packed in cribs and wrapped securely against the midday heat and the evening cool. When the harvesting slows down and when the last barn is curing out, the women folk and children unwrap the piles of yellow leaves and begin to grade them, sorting burnt leaves from green ones and torn leaves from long, thick wrappers—cigar tobacco. When it is graded and the sand shaken out it is tied up in handfuls and packed in the big wagons, ready to go to market. Then the farmers look out over the fields where their backs have bent for months and see rows of withered plants, shorn of their leaves, and wonder if the living is worth the sweat. But now they are ready for a few weeks of ease while the tobacco is being sold, a few days of pleasure in town.

This is where the bright yellow-leafed tobacco is sold. The warehouses are built of wood, cypress and pine. They cover acres, and on their floors 1,000,000 pounds of tobacco may be auctioned off in one day. It is carnival time when the season opens, and in towns

The farmers have money now and they mean to get rid of it soon. Everything is cocked and primed for them. There are men going about beating on drums to attract a crowd so they can sell some medicine. On a side street a small circus has unrolled its tent and sent its women about the streets strewing circulars and wisecracking at the men. A merry-go-round with a splintered calliope begins to whirl slowly. Hot dog stands with Greeks, Turks and darkies behind the kerosene stoves sift their greasy smells into the streets. Darkies sun themselves on benches in front of a row of cafes, smelling of shipped fish and brand-new corn whisky, fresh from copper stills in deep swamps.

Out of the belly of one of the cafes a stout Negro woman moves herself to the door and shakes a dinner bell and shouts, "Come on boys! Get yo' fish and peas." A puny Negro in ragged sailor breeches—a Virginia mulatto, almost white—comes down the street sobbing, twisting his thick lips with a low moan. He worked on a truck with three other Negroes, all black as stoves. He acted too high and mighty, and they didn't like his airs, so they beat him up. His face is bleeding, one ear is torn almost off and an eye is shut tight. The Negress, swinging the bell, sees him and calls, "Come yeah, boy. How yuh get huht? Come on honey and le' me doctuh yuh." But the man gives her a look like a snake's, and says, "Goddam yuh!" She is black too. He goes on down the street, shaking with an angry moan. The woman does not mind his curse. "Po' feller," is all she says.

In the street a horse trader is singing a song about mules. "Last call for the big horse and mule sale right around on Bulldog Alley, fine Tennessee and Kentucky mules sold for the highest dollar." A boy leads three stud-muscled mules; the trader, a young fellow with a hard blue face and a cigar in his mouth, turns to him and mutters, "Damn these people! They ain't got no money."

On a sandlot a sideshow has unloaded. On the back of a platform on which a showman is making a speech there is a splotched cloth sign with dancing women painted on it. A crowd of weary people slowly assemble around the platform. Their eager faces have faded and the day has become tasteless. The showman is talking, moving his face: "Gentlemen, this here is a show that is educational to the fullest extent. You will learn things here you never thought of, and remember to your dying day. Friends,

But the farmers are weary, weary. They only move uneasily in the crowd and watch the woman. The sun presses down and men pull off their hats and run a finger around the sweatbands inside. They are sweating like so many sponges. They are eager for their checks so they may do their trading and go on home. The showman looks them over nervously. He hasn't sold a single ticket, and they're only twenty-five cents apiece. "Gentlemen, I won't have this show heah tomorrow! I got to be movin' on. Tickets only two-bits. Come on up!" The woman has gone back into the tent and the men move away, one, two at a time. The showman gets an amazed look on his face. "Say," he says, "whatsamatter with you guys? Yuh got the pip?"

The darky cafes are vibrant with the sketchy, halting music of automatic pianos and with the smell of salt-fish frying on redhot stoves and the steady dead noise of tin forks touching heavy crockery. Inside the warehouse smells hang low like smoke in a kitchen; the tobacco smell tangles around everything; there is the smell of cypress lumber, of melting tar on roofs. The smell of sweat seeps through the air. Mules hitched to big-wheeled wagons stand in driveways. They move their tired hoofs in the dust and twitch their noses at the flies. The eyes of the auctioneer are bloodshot and he beats on his knees with a newspaper rolled up. The warehouseman calls to the buyers: "This is good tobacco, boys, pay for it" . . .

There are three old farmers sitting on their piles of tobacco arguing about two men who wanted to be President of the United States. Wherever they come together they sit and talk of politicians. One man says: "Ol' man Dougall walk' about town like he got first mortgage on the county say he glad he voted for Hoover."

"Yeh, Hoover said he'd help th' farmer. Loan us money. Keep us goin'. What he said."

"Who wants anybody to loan 'em money? Why'n't they pay us for what we make? Us work in the hot sun all summah while they talk and sit on their behinds."

"Smith was the one talked about co-operative marketing. Maybe get the right prices fo' our stuff like that."

"Maybe, yeh. But I tell you right now none of 'em gon' do anything fo' th' farmer. May as well vote fo' one as t'other."

"Yeh. Farmer work hard, but he get th' rear end of everything." . . .

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This is where the bright yellow-leafed tobacco is sold. The warehouses are built of wood, cypress and pine. They cover acres, and on their floors 1,000,000 pounds of tobacco may be auctioned off in one day. It is carnival time when the season opens, and in towns which number only 2,000 or 3,000 people in the winter time, 15,000 may walk the streets and smell the tobacco. Like giant hay barns, or rather like Zeppelin hangars, the warehouses open their doors.

In front of each house barkers wave their hands and shout, "Drive in. We got th' first sale. Unload yo' wagons right now." The planter drives his wagon inside and his tobacco is weighed and placed in a wide, flat, oak basket on the floor. The piles stretch across the house, lined up like soldiers. Sale time comes, the bell rings and the auctioneer, surrounded and followed by buyers from the big cigarette and cigar companies, goes up and down the rows, singing prices in a quick metallic voice. The fruits of a half year's dreary toil are disposed of in a split minute.

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The woman does not answer, so he sticks his head through a flap in the tent and calls, "Dammit, Nan, git ready and come on out!" A woman in a white bathing suit, with silk stockings rolled up at the knees, comes out on the platform. She smiles quickly to the men, softly places her hands on her hips and walks jerkily up and down the platform. Men stir in the crowd, but they do not buy tickets. The showman starts his talk again. Come on up!" The woman has gone back into the tent and the men move away, one, two at a time. The showman gets an amazed look on his face. "Say," he says, "whatsamatter with you guys? Yuh got the pip?"

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In front of every warehouse there is a line of rickety benches. On them sit women and children, white and colored. They spatter tobacco juice on the sidewalk, eat strawberry ice cream cones and hot dogs and halfheartedly talk of their lives. "How yo' folks, Lulu?" "Well, we jus' common. Move ovah, chil', and let me set. Can yuh spare me a lip o' snuff? Bad 'bout Annie's man, ain't it? Yeh, put him on the gang. Drinkin' an' cuttin' up and they caught him. An' he was good to Annie, won't he?" Mothers with the life creeping out of their bodies with the seasons, hold babies softly in their warm arms and croon, "Be quiet, honey. We goin' home soon. Goin' home soon, honey babe." A small boy sitting beside his mother, holding a crying child, says, "Ma, why'nt yuh give th' baby some ninny?"

Wagons filled with the dried out leaves of this weed with the slow, insolent smell, move through the streets. Big motor trucks ease by loaded down with hogsheads of packed down tobacco and horns quarrel with each other like screech owls on a warm evening. Way into the night the smartmikes stand with the warehouses at their backs, yelling, "Drive in, dammit, and we'll unload yo' wagon right now!"