

TOBACCO DAYS: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Coming in 2010 by Brassica Books

Introduction

I grew up in the "burley tobacco belt" that covered the Bluegrass sections of Kentucky and beyond, as well as portions of five neighboring states -- Ohio (where burley originated), West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, and Indiana. Like many of the seven million residents in this region as well as those throughout America's tobacco-growing areas, I changed my views about tobacco over time. Along with other tobacco-related "folks," I have sought to take an honest look at how tobacco entered, influenced, enticed, altered, harmed and left its mark on my life. These folks include a diverse grouping of growers, processors, sellers, users, relatives, advocates for or against, and caregivers for those who have used tobacco and its products in any manner. Actually the potential audience is broadly speaking about half of this country. However, this work is directed as a gentle prod to the one-fifth of American adults who are still tobacco users.

To this audience I present a challenge: see whether the tobacco enticement has marked your life in a significant manner and what you have learned from the process. My own journey with tobacco includes the benefits it gave to our family through income, its use and misuse in smoking, and its imprint on my own life. Reflection, not neglect, may make a difference for many, and so I offer this invitation: come to terms with your tobacco connection and see it on its total merits. The exercise is more than traditional scholarship; it is meant for both yourself and others who are coming to terms with the various allurements and enticements in their own lives -- that may very well go far beyond tobacco and include many other consumer products.

This reflection started with a different goal; I originally wanted to find out about my family's participation in the little known "Black Patch Wars" of Kentucky and Tennessee at the turn of the twentieth century. No one, not even my ordinarily talkative, story-telling father wanted to talk about that "war." The silence became somewhat intriguing, not that there was a family tale being suppressed, but that the respect that our neighbors held for each other, and the desire to heal past civil strife prevailed. Why the ambivalence on this subject? Tobacco was part of our life -- my birth

within a culture in rural Kentucky, our collective farm work, the people who used the product on a daily basis, their coughs and breathing difficulties, my own struggles with its effects on myself and on those who live within a smoking environment, the strong objections upon bringing up this subject, and even the prospects of some future for tobacco in more beneficial ways.

Tobacco has an enchanting side, and so I have delineated eight phases (one for each decade of my life). I start in the 1930s with the history of tobacco as collectively understood in my youth in post-depression times. Next comes a narrative of my somewhat pleasant experience in "raising" tobacco on our family farm in the 1940s. Then I leave home in the 1950s and consider the peer and commercial influences leading to becoming a smoker. Time passes and emerging community health issues with tobacco become apparent in the 1960s, at the time I am completing my doctorate research in a laboratory where fellow chemists are researching carcinogenic chemicals, some of which are present in the combustion of tobacco.

With the completion of studies during the 1970s, I begin my public interest career and help found the Center for Science in the Public Interest. Along with an emerging environmental concern is the discovery that environmental tobacco smoke is a major indoor pollution problem, and yet my mention of it brings immediate counter-attacks. Moral questions emerge as a focus during the 1980s. I quit smoking for good. The next decade is a period of advocacy about the effects of tobacco, presented for the most part as a pastoral worker and listener attending to tobacco victims. Finally we are in the twenty-first century and in a sea change of attitudes and a question of future direction: business as usual; alternative products in place of tobacco; beneficial uses of tobacco; or recounting lessons learned by and for people using, overusing and misusing a variety of substances.

After writing the first iteration of this book I realized that I had neglected the experience of tobacco as a template for similar journeys in our consumer-based culture. Yes, other commercial products could be promoted, sold and misused and could require control in much the same manner as tobacco in the twentieth century. I have shifted from what can ensure a future for tobacco growers using tobacco as such, to how this experience benefits other consumers both in this country and abroad. Tobacco has its own versatility, for it -- the apple of the New World's Eden -- is a commodity, a livelihood, a pleasure, a health risk, an addictive substance, an idol, and an experience worth narrating.

A liberation from tobacco becomes a redemption -- a saving of what has been flawed. The more I prove loyal to ancestry, commonwealth,

religious tradition, and personal odyssey, the greater the need to relate my tobacco journey. Tobacco is the best example of over-commercialization within our comfort-driven consumer culture both in America and throughout the world.