

When I was a little girl growing up in Cincinnati, I could not wait until the last day of school—not for the same reasons Alice Cooper sang about, “*No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers’ dirty looks.*” No, my reason for being so happy that school was out for the summer was quite simple. Summer vacation meant spending the long hot days of late May, June and July at Granny’s and Papaw’s on Hunting Creek in the hills of eastern Kentucky.

One would think all my brothers and I did was play, and there’s no denying that we sure had our share of tomfoolery, but going to my grandparents’ also meant learning lessons of good work ethic, and where better to acquire this education than in the long tobacco fields that stretched from one end of the hollow to the other?

By the time my brothers and I arrived at my grandparents in mid-May, it would be time to pick the tobacco seedlings nestled in their beds and transplant them to their temporary homes in the fields. I loved the “two-man” job of setting tobacco because I had two things going for me. I was a female and a youngster. With that in mind, Papaw would give me the easy job of dropping the seedling into the old-time tobacco setter at the same time as he stabbed the dry, unyielding earth with the heavy contraption. While depositing the wilted tobacco sprout into the dry ground, Papaw’ d give the setter handle a good squeeze and it’ d spit water on the thirsty plant. Occasionally, when a stubborn plant refused to sink its roots into the soil, those who followed the setters had the backbreaking task of pushing them deeper into the ground by hand.

Weeks later, as my brothers and I played in the cool creek that ran alongside the fields, we paid little attention to the well-fertilized plants reaching toward the sun like a child stretching after a long night’s rest. After weeks of gathering tadpoles, chasing crawdads, and sunbathing on the large flat sand rocks, Papaw’ d remind us that our days of frolicking were numbered.

The next job for tobacco production was spraying for worms and bugs and topping the plants. Again, my age and gender allowed me to bypass the breaking of blooms to get rid of the suckers. To my advantage, Papaw was never an equal opportunist.

Then it would be time for a little more fun and games. My brothers and I took great pleasure in these breaks when we would wait for two or three weeks for the tobacco to turn from dark jade to a golden yellow, because we knew the hard part of the tobacco process was right around the bend.

Before we knew it, it was time to drop the “backer” sticks end-to-end in the rows of tobacco to begin cutting. Although I was a tomboy and liked to be a part of the tobacco workforce, I got in the way more than I helped. When I look back on the cutting phase of the tobacco raising process, it is hard to believe how many friends and family members came to help Papaw and Granny. The men stuck the sticks into the ground and fit them with a metal spear on the end that was used to skewer the tobacco. (I always had such a fear of sticking that ominous spear in my eye.) The workers cut the plants one-by-one with a hefty knife and thrust them onto the stick.

When the sticks were full of about five or six stalks on each, the workers left them standing in the fields like old gentlemen bent over from a lifetime of wear and tear. The tobacco would wilt in the hot sun until the menfolk loaded it onto the back of the pickups to be hauled to the barn for hanging. This was my favorite part. I could only make it to the first tier of rafters of the barn—hanging on for dear life, and I surely was not going to let go to hang a stick of tobacco. So, I just stayed out of everyone’s way and practiced my balance beam feats (which entailed putting one foot in front of the other). My older brother, Wayne, on the other hand, was a monkey climbing those rafters. He always chose to go to the top because he was fearless.

Although it was challenging work and I had my moments when I would whine about the scorching sun pounding down on me, or the horseflies biting my scrawny legs, I loved being a part of the work team. I loved the cool drinks from the dipper we shared at break time. I loved the baloney sandwiches, Moon Pies, and Nehi sodas (strawberry was my favorite) Granny served us in the cool shade of the barn. I loved the stories and the jokes that were told. And I especially loved that even though it was challenging work, neighbors helped neighbors; that is just the way it was at baccar-pickin’ time on Hunting Creek.

--Donna Fugate