

THE STORY OF BURLEY TOBACCO FARMING IN BETHEL, WATAUGA COUNTY,  
NORTH CAROLINA: CULTURAL MEANINGS AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

A Thesis  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

THE STORY OF BURLEY TOBACCO FARMING IN BETHEL, WATAUGA COUNTY,  
NORTH CAROLINA: CULTURAL MEANINGS AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS, (MAY  
2012)

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During the twentieth century, tobacco farming characterized the culture and economy of many southern Appalachian mountain communities, including Bethel, Watauga County, North Carolina. Since 2004, following the end of the federal tobacco program, tobacco farming in the mountains has all but ended. In 2011, only three farmers raised tobacco in Bethel, the last tobacco farming community in the county. At one time, hundreds of farmers grew tobacco every year in Watauga County. What was once an important crop and way of life in the mountains is now gone. Although tobacco farming often provided partial portions of incomes in the mountains, tobacco farming, as part of diversified farm operations, was critical to the maintenance and sustainability of agrarian cultures and economies. Now, without tobacco farming, agrarian communities in the mountains face a tenuous future. This thesis examines the culture and economy of tobacco farming in Bethel, Watauga County, North Carolina from its origins, in the 1930s, to today.

## DEDICATION

*“Burley would take it up then, mourning and mocking: ‘Have you reached the other shore, dear brother? Have you seen that distant land?’ And he would sing,*

*Oh, pilgrim, have you seen that distant land?”*

*- Wendell Berry, “That Distant Land,” in The Wild Birds, 1985, p. 110*

*“Now, daddy sits on his front porch swinging,  
looking out on a vacant field.  
It used to be filled with burley tobacco,  
now he knows that it never will.”*

*- Darrell Scott, “Long Time Gone,” 2000*

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Association for selecting a paper modified from Chapter 4, “Bethel: The Context of Mountain Tobacco Farming,” as the Carl A. Ross Student Paper Award for 2012.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: BURLEY TOBACCO FARMING IN BETHEL,  
WATAUGA COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

**A statement of the problem**

Tobacco has a long history in America and in the Appalachian region. Famously, it was one of the crops Native Americans introduced to Europeans when Europeans began exploring, trading in, and then later settling, these already lived-in lands. The highlights of how the rest of this story goes are well known: eventually, by the mid-seventeenth century, American colonists were cultivating tobacco as a cash crop, and with European innovation tobacco production became a significant global export industry (Goodman, 2005). Global commercial tobacco farming was born in the Americas, reached great heights as a major industry of the mid-South in the United States, and continues to this day as a major global industry. This thesis concerns a segment of the historical and current global tobacco farming industry, specifically, the culture and economy of a tobacco farming, southern Appalachian mountain community: Bethel, Watauga County, North Carolina.

Even though tobacco farming in the mountains has typically provided only partial portions of farming incomes throughout the twentieth century, tobacco has still had a significant economic and cultural impact (Griffith, 2009). In the 1930s and 1940s, spurred on by New Deal agricultural legislation that created the federal tobacco program, tobacco farming helped transition subsistence-based farmers in mountain communities such as Bethel toward a more full integration into the market economy. As farmers became fully integrated into the market economy throughout the twentieth century, the culture and economy of

tobacco farming perpetuated social and community connections and agrarian ways of life that otherwise would have been lost to modernization. Although tobacco farming in the mountains was typically part of diversified farm livelihoods and only provided portions of incomes, tobacco money provided for important cultural components, such as Christmas gifts, property taxes, college tuitions, etc. Moreover, since most tobacco farms in Watauga County were small in size, often just a few acres, family work continued to characterize some tobacco operations even as the use of migrant labor became more prevalent in the late 1990s and 2000s. In short, tobacco farming was a crucial element to the survival of agrarian cultures and economies in the mountains.

Once the federal tobacco program ended in 2004, tobacco farming in the mountains became economically impractical. Without the program's price supports and marketing quotas, which guaranteed a minimum price for tobacco crops on the one hand, and restricted the amount of tobacco individuals could grow on the other, thus limiting the overall amount of tobacco on the market, tobacco grown in the mountains, in small, one or two acre allotments, could not compete with tobacco grown by larger and more efficient operations. Consequently, most mountain tobacco farmers quit growing the crop after the end of the tobacco program in 2004. In 2011, only three farmers raised tobacco in Bethel. At one time in Watauga County, hundreds of farmers raised the crop. Going forward, I find that the loss of tobacco farming has contributed to the decline of the agrarian culture and economy of the mountains as a livelihood and way of life. Some emerging agrarian strategies in Appalachia, such as sustainable agricultural efforts, provide some hope for a renewed agrarian culture and economy. In the conclusion to this thesis, I suggest that these efforts have much to learn from

the history and development of the tobacco program/tobacco economy and that finding common ground between the two is key.

### **An introduction: The culture and economy of tobacco in Bethel**

Bethel, in western Watauga County, North Carolina, is the county's only remaining tobacco growing community. Since burley tobacco first came to Watauga County, farmers in Bethel have grown the crop. Although many Appalachian and mountain communities trace the roots of their tobacco economies to well before the twentieth century, burley tobacco was not an important cash crop in Watauga County until the 1930s and 1940s. To use an example from Chapter 4, Madison County, North Carolina, today about a two-hour drive from Watauga County, produced over 2.2 million pounds of burley tobacco on 2,186 farms in 1929 (U.S. Census, 1930). Prior to that, in the late nineteenth century, Madison was one of North Carolina's major bright leaf tobacco producers. Watauga County, however, had no such tobacco history. Just 54 farms reported growing tobacco in Watauga County in 1929, producing approximately 15,000 pounds on 20 acres (*ibid.*). Clearly, even within the mountains of North Carolina, agrarian cultures and economies developed differently. These statistics with regard to Watauga County's late entrance into the tobacco economy, along with data collected from interviews in Bethel, point toward Bethel's roots in subsistence-based agriculture, an argument that is developed further in Chapter 4.

Throughout the twentieth century in Bethel and Watauga County, despite tobacco farms being quite small, often a half-acre to two acres, tobacco farming was ubiquitous. In 1969, some 777 farms reported growing tobacco in Watauga County (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1969). After 1971, when the lease and transfer of quota provision became a part

of the burley program, tobacco production began to concentrate in areas most thoroughly involved in tobacco farming. In the case of Watauga County, leasing quotas could only take place within county lines, and the Bethel community was one of the places within the county where tobacco production trended towards, thus further engraining tobacco farming in Bethel, where it is still grown today.

Bethel's tobacco culture and economy was predicated on the inherent stability that the federal tobacco program provided for farmers. The tobacco program functioned to control the amount of tobacco on the market and its baseline price on the market. In practice, for example, this made burley tobacco grown on one acre in Watauga County competitive with burley grown on, say, 50 acres in Tennessee. The program allowed small tobacco farmers in the mountains the opportunity to receive a competitive price on their crops. This fact is crucial to understanding why and how tobacco farming continued into the twenty-first century in mountain communities. The program allowed these communities, such as Bethel, to maintain their social and cultural connections even as modernization, and later neoliberalism and free markets, began to change the structure of work and life in American agriculture. If the program had not existed or had failed in 1970 or in the mid-1980s, tobacco farming in the mountains would not have lasted as long as it did.

By the 1990s, significant pressures from health organizations, fiscal conservatives in Congress, and free market and neoliberal advocates, worked to terminate the tobacco program. In 2004, the program ended, and the U.S. tobacco farming economy was finally deregulated. The effects of this decision were felt immediately. As the 2007 Census of Agriculture statistics clearly show, after the buyout, tobacco production in the mountains all



but ended. Watauga County, which in 2002 had 187 tobacco farms, in 2007, 3 years after the buyout, had just 11 tobacco farms. Its production fell from close to one million pounds, roughly its historic average, to barely 44,000 pounds in three years. Without the program, tobacco farming in the mountains was simply not viable economically. Tobacco prices were dropping, labor and input costs were rising, and things were too difficult for mountain farmers to profit from raising tobacco. Since most of these former tobacco farmers grew tobacco part-time or as a part of diversified farm work, losing tobacco money was not economically devastating to most livelihoods. But, I believe its cultural losses were substantial, because a tradition and way of life had been lost. This past year in Bethel, only three people raised tobacco, and Bethel is the last tobacco growing community in Watauga County. With the tobacco economy now in a new state of affairs, it is doubtful mountain tobacco farmers will raise tobacco in the years to come. What does this mean for the agrarian culture and economy of the mountains in the future?

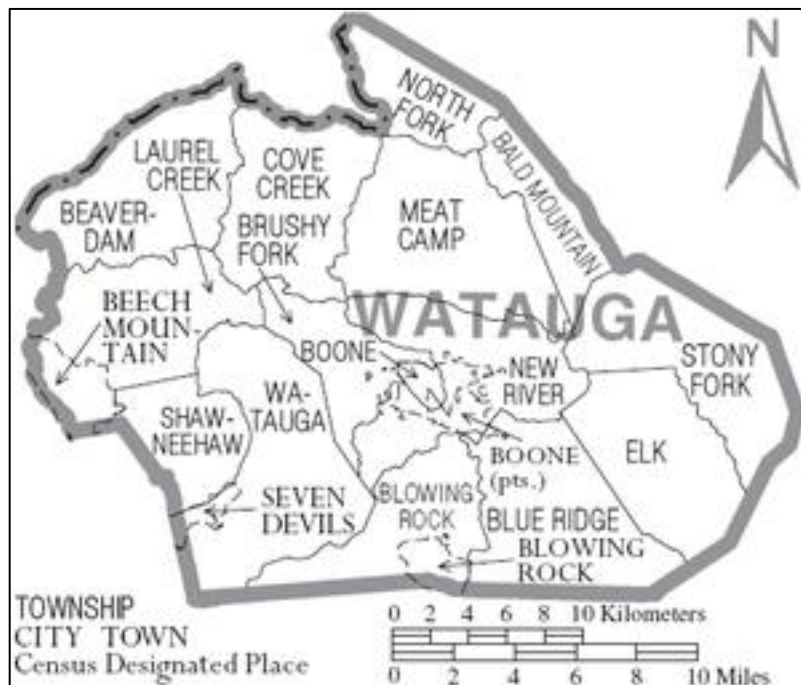
#### **A note on terminology**

Throughout this thesis, a few words, phrases, and one place name, Bethel, are used that require some explication at the outset. For the purposes of this thesis, any use of the place name Bethel refers to the greater area of western Watauga County within which the community of Bethel is located. Historically, Arthur (1915) refers to this section of the county as Beaverdams, another community within what is now known as Bethel (see Map 4.1). Today, Watauga County still employs the traditional name of the area, Beaver Dam, with regard to its voting precincts (“Watauga County Board of Elections: Precincts,” 2011). In practice, however, this area is most often called Bethel, and likely the use of this name

stems from the historic Bethel High School, which was built in 1934 and closed in 1965 when Watauga County consolidated all high schools (Corbitt, 1976). During the years of Bethel High School, it stands to reason that Bethel became the *de facto* name of the Beaver Dam/Beaverdams area. I use the name Bethel in this thesis to refer to what is still officially the Beaver Dam township/voting precinct (see Map 1.1).

Map 1.1. Watauga County townships (U.S. Census Bureau). Retrieved from:

[http://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/general\\_ref/cousub\\_outline/cen2k\\_pgsc/nc\\_cosub.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/general_ref/cousub_outline/cen2k_pgsc/nc_cosub.pdf)



A few other important words and phrases also need clarification at this point. As is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, the federal tobacco program was not merely one program for all tobacco varieties, but several programs for each variety of tobacco (Mann, 1975). Burley tobacco, therefore, had its own “program.” In most cases, any use of the phrase “tobacco program” refers to the federal burley tobacco program, unless otherwise noted, or

unless the topic at hand is noticeably broad. For example, when the discussion concerns, say, “how free market ideologies helped undermine the tobacco program in the 1990s,” the use of the term “tobacco program” refers to all of the programs (burley, flue-cured, dark, etc.). Still, in most cases, any use of the phrases “tobacco program” or simply “the program” should point back to the burley tobacco program and burley economy. The context of the discussions, topics, and chapters in this thesis are clear enough to enable the reader to discern how to interpret the meanings of the phrase “tobacco program.” As an example, “the end of the tobacco program in 2004 is often referred to as ‘the buyout.’” In this case, the tobacco program refers to all the programs. Moreover, “the buyout” is the common name for the end of the program, because tobacco companies paid nearly ten billion dollars to tobacco quota holders, typically in ten years installments, to deregulate the U.S. tobacco economy and end the program (see Chapters 3, 4, and 5). The term, “the buyout,” is also used throughout this thesis in reference to the end of the program.

Lastly, the phrase “mountain tobacco farming” and its derivatives are used throughout this thesis to denote the distinctiveness of burley tobacco farming communities in the Southern Appalachian Mountains from other burley producing regions. For the purposes of this thesis, “mountain tobacco farming” or “tobacco grown in the mountains” refers primarily to the mountain counties of Western North Carolina. This definition can also include Unicoi County, Tennessee and Johnson County, Tennessee, a neighboring mountain county of Watauga County, North Carolina. References to mountain tobacco farming in this thesis may also characterize the mountain portions of Tennessee counties which span the state line with North Carolina. This definition of mountain tobacco farming does not include counties in

eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, or the foothills and valleys of Virginia and Tennessee, though there may be similarities between these burley producing areas and the mountain counties of western North Carolina.

### **Methods**

In my ethnographic research with tobacco farmers in Watauga County, I have primarily relied upon qualitative data for analyzing the culture and economy of tobacco farming in Bethel, Watauga County, North Carolina. In order to distill the qualitative information I have gathered, this thesis consists of my own words and observations about the meaning of what my informants, the tobacco farmers of Bethel, have told me through their words and actions (Bernard, 2006). For a topic such as this, gathering qualitative information, and using or supplementing with quantitative data analysis, provides a well-rounded method for answering questions related to the statement of the problem, such as, “How did a stable tobacco price and market, over the course of the twentieth century, help maintain a farming culture in the mountains of western North Carolina?” Starting with these types of questions provides the baseline from which to begin qualitative research.

The research for this thesis began in my first semester of graduate school, in the fall of 2010 in Dr. Fred Hay’s Appalachian Studies 5000 course, Bibliography and Research, with an exhaustive bibliography regarding tobacco farming in the southern Appalachian Mountains. In the spring semester of 2011, my focus for this project began to take shape in Dr. Susan Keefe’s Anthropology 5450 course, Qualitative Methods and Research. Over the course of the next year, I had many informal conversations with Watauga County residents with regard to tobacco farming, worked with one farmer in Bethel, Mr. Shelby Eggers, as a

participant observer, conducted interviews with current and former tobacco farmers in Bethel, and examined quantitative data related to the topic.

### **Participant observation**

Participant observation is data collection in the field and can take many forms (Bernard, 2006). In qualitative research, participant observation typically involves fieldwork and field notes, taking photographs, and recording audio and interviews, etc. Bernard (2006) writes that participant observation “involves immersing yourself in a culture and learning to remove yourself every day from that immersion so that you can intellectualize what you’ve seen and heard, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly” (p. 344). The goal, then, is to collect better and more accurate data from which to draw conclusions to the problem.

My own method of participant observation has entailed fieldwork with a tobacco farmer in Bethel, Shelby Eggers. Beginning in late summer of 2011 and continuing through the winter of 2012, I traveled to Bethel during key times of the tobacco-growing season to see and participate in the process of raising a tobacco crop. This experience as a participant observer benefitted the research for this thesis greatly. For one thing, working with Mr. Eggers allowed me to develop better rapport with him. As Bernard (2006) writes, “just hanging out is a skill,” and in my experience in the field, hanging out, learning how to work tobacco, having conversations, and becoming friends all helped provide rapport, or trust, between myself and Mr. Eggers. Gaining trust, then, allowed me to gain a more full access into a part of Bethel’s farming culture. I was able to hear jokes, stories about farming in the community, was able to ask deeper and tougher questions, and ultimately, I believe, I was

able to draw more accurate conclusions. Developing rapport is a critical aspect of good research, because it provides the researcher access to a part of the culture under observation that is typically unavailable through other methods, such as one-time interviews.

### **Interviewing**

The ways to conduct an interview for scholarly research vary. At one end of the spectrum, some are strictly structured, while at the other end, some interviews are wholly unstructured, yet, not informal (Bernard, 2006). Ethnographic interviewing often falls along the lines of unstructured or semistructured. In the first interviews with tobacco farmers for this thesis (the first interviews I had ever conducted), I relied upon an interview guide made up of questions that I thought pertained to the cycle of growing tobacco and the changes that have taken place in the tobacco economy over the years. As I got more comfortable conducting interviews and learned more about my topic, I relied less on a formal set of questions and more on an unstructured interview style to gather information.

Whereas participant observation created rapport and provided an inside look into Bethel's tobacco culture and economy, interviewing current and former tobacco farmers provided significant qualitative data in one sitting, typically, an hour to an hour and a half. The data gathered from these interviews in the spring of 2011, then, became the foundation for this thesis. These interviews provided information that is unattainable in any book or scholarly source, making this research unique within the field of anthropology and Appalachian Studies on the one hand, and bringing a new story to the greater fabric of work being done in agrarian/tobacco farming communities, on the other (Algeo, 1997; Benson, 2012; Donaldson, 2011; Griffith, 2009; Kingsolver, 2011; Stull, 2009).

## **Quantitative data**

Qualitative data gathered through interviews and participant observation also prompted the addition of quantitative data to this thesis. Both interview and participant observation data shed light on factors of this research that I previously overlooked, was unsure about, or had not heard about. In these cases, agricultural census statistics, road maps, state extension documents, and previous scholarly research, among other things, greatly aided the development of the arguments put forth in this thesis. During the writing process of this project, when data collected from interviews left me with more questions than answers, quantitative data helped solidify the foundations of this thesis. Specific dates of events, such as the switch from acreage to poundage quotas in 1971 (see Chapter 3), were illuminated by quantitative data. U.S. Census of Agriculture statistics were also vital to this research. Many of my arguments, specifically regarding the subsistence-based culture and economy of Bethel prior to the 1930s, could not have been made if not for census data, which a) backed up information gathered in interviews and b) provided hard facts concerning the farming economy of Watauga County in the 1930s. Employing both qualitative and quantitative research, therefore, has greatly benefitted the arguments put forth in this thesis.

## **Overview**

What does the loss of tobacco farming mean for the agrarian culture and economy of Bethel and other mountain communities going forward? I find that without tobacco and without the tobacco program, farming in the mountains as a livelihood and way of life will continue to decline. As one man from Bethel told me this past winter as we graded tobacco, “Anymore, farming is just a hobby.” Despite the fact that tobacco farming only provided

partial sources of incomes, tobacco was a critical means of keeping farms and farm communities actively working at farming as a job. It was part of a diversified operation, and many farmers were able to use combinations of tobacco, cattle, logging, and other work, to make a living. Without tobacco, that diversified system is less resilient and less economically feasible, and subsequently, the future of farming in Bethel is in doubt. Though there are hopes and possibilities that organic or sustainable agriculture can revive fading farming cultures and economies in the mountains, it remains to be seen whether these initiatives will create the type of long-term stability that the tobacco program did. Farming as a way of life survived in Bethel for so many years, because the tobacco program provided small farmers with competitive prices for their crops, and this prolonged the social and cultural connections of this place into the twenty-first century. For an agrarian culture and economy to reemerge in the mountains in the twenty-first century, attention must be given to the story of tobacco farming and the tobacco program.

CHAPTER 2 addresses the global economic framework within which the tobacco economy was, and is, situated. A brief examination of development, capitalism, and neoliberalism shows how globalization and economic policy have changed over the course of the twentieth century, leading to changes in the tobacco economy in places such as Bethel. Moreover, this chapter discusses complex systems theory/resilience thinking, which provides the framework for understanding globalism's effects at the local level.

CHAPTER 3 outlines the structure and function of the federal tobacco program. The chapter examines how and why the program developed, how the program was maintained throughout the twentieth century, how key leaders were crucial to the success of the program,



and how and why the program ended. Because the federal tobacco program sustained mountain tobacco farming throughout the twentieth century, an examination of the tobacco program is critical for understanding the tobacco culture and economy of Bethel.

CHAPTER 4 examines the context of mountain tobacco farming in Bethel, Watauga County, North Carolina. The chapter discusses literature pertaining to rural communities, agrarian ways of life, and tobacco farming and combines it with quantitative and qualitative data regarding the historic tobacco culture and economy of Bethel and Watauga County.

CHAPTER 5 tells the story of tobacco farming in Bethel from the perspectives of Bethel's tobacco farmers. The chapter examines how the culture and economy of tobacco farming has changed in Bethel from the early days of growing the crop, through the years of the program, and now to the deregulated tobacco economy years. For the most part, tobacco farming in the mountains is no longer possible, and this chapter explores why this is so.

CHAPTER 6 concludes this thesis by briefly exploring the possibilities of sustainable agriculture emerging in place of tobacco in the Appalachian Mountains. Are there other agricultural options for agrarian communities that once relied upon tobacco farming? The chapter discusses this question and puts forth ways in which sustainable agriculture movements might benefit from studying the development of the tobacco economy/federal tobacco program.

## CHAPTER 2: THE TOBACCO ECONOMY FROM THE GLOBAL TO THE LOCAL

### **Introduction**

In order to understand why tobacco farming has disappeared from the mountain economy, it is necessary to situate the tobacco economy of Bethel within a broader framework of Western economic policy and globalization, because, ultimately, these factors directly contributed to the decline of mountain tobacco farming. And so, this chapter undertakes an examination of development, capitalism, and neoliberalism in order to demonstrate how Bethel fits within this larger global economy. The discussion of neoliberalism and the changes it brought to the tobacco economy in the United States, then, informs a discussion of how complex systems theory provides a solid framework from which to view how the tobacco economy has operated over time. This chapter provides the global context within which the tobacco economy of Bethel operated.

The first section of this chapter begins with a discussion of development. Scott (1998) writes that traditional development, as conceived by the ancient Greeks, for example, encompassed local knowledge and limits to growth, among other things, and differs greatly from present-day notions of linear development, or linear progress. A brief history of capitalism is important for understanding the context of burley tobacco farming in the Appalachian Mountains, because, on the one hand, tobacco produced in the United States, since Europeans first began cultivating the crop, has always been a global commodity (Goodman, 2005; Kingsolver, 2011). Therefore, the very existence of a commercial tobacco market in the twentieth century in Bethel can trace its roots to the global trade and the

expansion of capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, examining the processes of capitalism helps to make sense of the U.S. tobacco economy prior to the New Deal and informs how post-World War II development theories, epitomized by the Truman Doctrine, worked to create conditions that were conducive to the expansion of markets across the world. The merger of development and capitalism fostered a greater emphasis on production and efficiency and created economic changes and disruptions abroad and in the United States (Escobar, 1995). Moreover, this market ideology directly altered the course of American agriculture in the twentieth century, forcing hundreds of thousands people off of farms and eventually leading to the farm debt crisis in the 1980s, among other things (Dudley, 2000).

The policies and ideologies that fueled the Truman Doctrine also led to the instability of underdeveloped nations' economies, and by the latter decades of the twentieth century, and in a climate of economic instability, a new strain of capitalism that embraced free markets and free trade began to emerge: neoliberalism (Benson, 2012; Escobar, 1995; Harvey, 2005; Plant, 2010; Touraine, 2001). Plant (2010) writes that the neoliberal state:

is not inspired by social justice; it is limited in scope; it is not designed to change relative positions of individuals and groups within society; it embodies a view of negative liberty; it is compatible only with a set of negative rights; it does not seek the achievement of specific ends such as social justice or social solidarity (p. 250).

Neoliberalism embraces the idea that market solutions rather than government intervention should drive economic policy and actions. And yet, there are no clear reasons as to how the neoliberal principle of government non-intervention could apply, for instance, to the banking

crisis of 2008 (Plant, 2010). As Carlsen (2003) argues, this principle of government non-intervention in the markets is a myth: although neoliberals espouse their disgust for government intervention, they do, in fact, use government to distort market conditions in order to create the “free market.” Subsidies, tax breaks, financing, and global trade organizations all work to keep the market “free.” Rather than benefitting the world’s poor, working classes, and middle classes, this neoliberal model concentrates wealth and disrupts traditional livelihoods (Carlsen, 2003). Neoliberal principles squarely oppose social justice/egalitarian/democratic initiatives and programs. As part of this neoliberal agenda, direct foreign investment in tobacco production by tobacco companies helped create the conditions necessary for undermining regulated tobacco production in the United States (Benson, 2012). These initiatives served to weaken support for the federal tobacco program, eventually leading to its end in 2004, and in the aftermath a new state of tobacco farming emerged.

Lastly, a discussion of complex systems theory provides a good framework from which to view the conditions that have characterized tobacco farming in the U.S. throughout the twentieth century. In this section, the adaptive cycle, which views systems in terms of four phases: reorganization, growth, conservation, and release, and is a counterpoint to models of linear growth, is explained and put forth as the best way to examine the tobacco economy. Grasping the basics of complex systems theory allows for an understanding of how and why the U.S. tobacco economy/tobacco program developed, sustained, and changed over time. This consciousness, therefore, can inform the possible future development of renewed agrarian cultures and economies in the mountains.

## Development

Traditionally, prior to the global rise of capitalism, which began with European expansion across the oceans, development implied the process of living and growing within the cyclical nature of life. For the ancient Greeks, development was restrained within the confines of a natural environment/ecosystem and social system (Schech and Haggis, 2000). This is not to say that these were static and insular societies, however, but that their development had limits, and as is shown in the next chapters, the cultural and economic structure of pre-1930s Bethel shares similarities with this mode of development. As the twentieth century progressed, the idea of development increasingly consisted of achieving progress in a linear, standardized fashion. Achieving “development” became the goal of modern economies, and this ideal subsequently influenced economic policy in the U.S. and abroad. Eventually, this framework created the conditions necessary for the expansion of neoliberalism around the world.

We know from stories such as *The Odyssey* the extent that the Greeks traveled, but in such stories, we also find a dedication to native soil and family, as illustrated by Odysseus’s longing to return home. Perhaps more strikingly, this dedication is found within Penelope’s use of *metis*, or the practical experience that makes up knowledge, in determining the true Odysseus. Contrasting twentieth century agrarian standardization with the traditional development of the Greeks, James Scott (1998) posits that *metis* informs Penelope’s testing of Odysseus. She says to Eurycleia and the Stranger (the disguised Odysseus): “move the sturdy bedstead out of our bridal chamber—that room the master [Odysseus] built with his own hands” (Homer, 1996, p. 461). Upon hearing this remark, Odysseus becomes obviously

inflamed, because he shares intimate knowledge with Penelope that their bed is literally rooted in the ground, being crafted from the base of an olive tree. Thus, by acknowledging the history of their bed and the olive tree, Odysseus confirms his true identity to Penelope.

Perhaps, then, if this scene may be framed in terms of development for the present argument, the *metis* displayed by Odysseus and Penelope, or the practical experience that provides their knowledge, indicates that holistic development encompasses a devotion to a specific place on the one hand, and a shared/specific knowledge of that place on the other, which can then inform life's decisions. Within the life, death, decay, and rebirth cycle of life, this pursuit of development inherently encompasses diversity, adaptability, and complexity and rejects such things as standardization and lack of context (Scott, 1998).

The American agrarian economy of the twentieth century encompassed aspects of both local context and standardization. Bethel's pre-1930s subsistence-based economy, for example, more closely resembled the traditional economy that Scott (1998) credits to the ancient Greeks. To be sure, compared to the rest of America, and to other tobacco producing regions of Appalachia, Bethel was late in its involvement in the modern market economy (Algeo, 1997; Donaldson, 2011; Hatch, 2008). This point is explicated in more detail in Chapter 4, but for now, it suffices to say that even during Bethel's transition to full involvement in the market economy post-1930s, its agrarian economy held over aspects of local knowledge and social connections from its traditional past.

The catalyst that sparked Bethel's transition to the market economy and allowed it to maintain its agrarian identity throughout the twentieth century was, ironically, an act of standardization: the development of the federal tobacco program in the 1930s. But, even

though this federal act standardized tobacco markets in the United States, it still allowed for regional differences, or local tobacco contexts. As is detailed in Chapter 3, the federal tobacco program did not encompass one program of price supports and production controls for all tobacco in the United States (Mann, 1975). Since different U.S. regions specialized in different varieties of tobacco (i.e., burley, dark, flue-cured, etc.), and since each variety had its own distinct growing, curing, and marketing differences, each variety of tobacco had its own federal tobacco program, managed by regional cooperatives (Mann, 1975). Although the tobacco program imposed standardization, the program still encapsulated local/regional knowledge and context. And, as is illustrated in more detail in the next chapter, the program safeguarded tobacco farmers from the unregulated forces of the markets, enabling the continuation of traditional ways of life in places such as Bethel (Benson, 2012; Griffith, 2009; Stull, 2009; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998).

With the onset of European expansion and capitalism during the Enlightenment period, development, then, became more associated with achieving linear progress (Schech and Haggis, 2000). In this way, development became less of a cyclical/natural process and more of an intention, whereby nation states imposed control and order on processes of development, or human advancement, at home and around the world (Schech and Haggis, 2000). This development model lent itself to centuries of European colonization, to twentieth century distinctions between developed and underdeveloped countries, to goodwill development policies, and to corporate marketing strategies aimed at maximizing corporate profit (Benson, 2012; Escobar, 1995; Schech and Haggis, 2000). The hallmark of these initiatives, besides being fundamentally linked to trade and economic expansion, rests in their

linear attempts to impose some kind of standardization in order to achieve development. The problem is that these attempts often disrupt the cultural, economic, ecological, and social structures of communities around the world. Moreover, the world's development problems, such as hunger, economic instability, and poverty, are not improving (Escobar, 1995).

The notion of linear development differs from the type of traditional development that, like *The Odyssey*, embraced the natural turn of life and death and was based on specificity and local knowledge. According to Scott (1998), this notion of development, which embraces local social and ecological contexts, seems “ideally suited to postindustrial capitalism” (p. 354). In effect, perhaps it's time we returned to life, and therefore development, within limits—a topic returned to in the conclusion of this thesis, with regard to the future of agrarian cultures and economies in the mountains (see Chapter 6). As of now, however, this is decidedly not the way the current tobacco economy is structured in the United States and around the world (Benson, 2012; Griffith, 2009; Kingsolver, 2011; Stull, 2009). The current tobacco economy favors by and large more standardization, increased mechanization and efficiency, larger operations, and inexpensive labor. It is the opposite of Scott's (1998) ideal.



## Capitalism

*“He smiled and all his teeth were covered with tobacco stains,  
He said ‘It don’t do men no good to pray for peace and rain.  
Peace and rain is just a way to say prosperity,  
And buffalo chips is all it means to me...’*

*‘It’s faster horses, younger women, older whiskey, and more money.’”*

- Tom T. Hall (1975)

In this section, a brief overview of capitalism, from its origins to its current neoliberal bent, provides the background for understanding the progression of the United States tobacco economy during the twentieth century. Reviewing capitalism’s nascent stages sheds light on government’s historic role in the marketplace. As trade expanded and the Industrial Revolution transformed the global economy in the nineteenth century, the role of government began to change as deregulated economic spheres came to characterize major industries, such as the tobacco industry, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In many ways, capitalism has come full circle since the time of these American monopolies: after a period of swift government involvement in the marketplace during the New Deal years and an extended period of government regulation in the tobacco economy during the twentieth century, the tobacco economy is once again deregulated and subject to the uncertainties deregulation brings.

Just as Enlightenment thinking influenced notions of development, so too did its principles, such as individuality, empiricism, freedom, specialization, etc., crossover into the economic sphere and influence the rise of global capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These principles fell hand in hand with the global expansion of European trade already under way, which, beginning in the 1400s, continued through the 1600s and into the

era of European colonization (Robbins, 2002). As part of this global trade, of course, stood tobacco, which was first grown commercially in the Americas by the Spanish in the sixteenth century and then by the British in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Greene, 1994). By the 1700s, the global European gold and silver trade had evolved into mercantilism, whereby states sought to protect and expand trade in order to prevent wealth from leaving their nations, and this led to the rise of protective economic legislation, the continued exploitation of cheap labor supplies (i.e., slavery), and the evolution of joint stock companies, among other things (Robbins, 2002). Moreover, this era saw the rise of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, which combined with the mercantilist expansion of trade, transformed Britain, and eventually the rest of the Western countries, and ushered in the capitalist economy (Robbins, 2002). In this emerging climate of capitalism, commercial tobacco production began to flourish in the colonial United States and a culture and economy of growing tobacco developed (Greene, 1994).

Robbins (2002) writes that the capitalist economy requires “purchasing and combining the means of production and labor power to produce commodities...that are then sold for a sum greater than the initial investment” (p. 79). One central area where the capitalist economy differs from pre-capitalist economies is labor power. Eric Wolf (in Robbins, 2002) suggests that capitalism exists because the link between producers and the means of production has been cut, and thus those denied that access, to land for example, must then “negotiate with those who control the means of production for permission to use the land and tools and receive a wage in return” (p. 79). This use of labor turns peasants, for instance, into laborers and consumers, making the accumulation of wealth possible for those

who control the means of production. In the history of tobacco farming in the U.S., this includes slaves, tenant farmers, and migrant workers, who not owning their own land have had to negotiate with landowners (often other tobacco farmers) for their livelihoods and/or wages (Kingsolver, 2007). Furthermore, the state provides its power in capitalist economies to maintain labor control, provide infrastructure, and regulate competition (Robbins, 2002; Goodman, 2005).

The role of the state regarding tobacco production has varied over the course of American history. American industry, including the tobacco industry for example, benefitted enormously in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from a relaxed regulatory climate. As is discussed at greater length in the next chapter, tobacco farmers prior to the New Deal legislation of the 1930s dealt with fluctuating market prices for their tobacco and were subsequently left with unstable economic livelihoods, because the U.S. tobacco economy was controlled by a monopoly, American Tobacco Company (ATC) (Stull, 2009; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). ATC effectively controlled the means of production, and maximized their profit, by creating a tobacco economy in which tobacco farmers produced increasing amounts of tobacco that brought a continually lower and fluctuating price. This worked to the detriment of those farmers (Goodman, 2005; Greene, 1994). Although the ATC monopoly was broken up in 1911, tobacco farmers still experienced market volatility until the 1930s when the federal government created price supports and production controls for tobacco (the federal tobacco program) that worked to stabilize the market for farmers (Badger, 1980; Goodman, 2005; Mann, 1975; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). This program lasted until 2004, decades past the time when other federal support programs for

crops such as corn and wheat had ended. The next chapter details the development of the tobacco program, its structure, how it functioned, and how the program, in spite of a changing agricultural and economic climate, continued to function to the benefit of small tobacco growers until the end of the twentieth century. The tobacco economy has come full circle, and now, characterized by neoliberalism, it more closely resembles the deregulated tobacco economy of the early twentieth century.

### **An emerging form of development and capitalism: neoliberalism**

Understanding how and why neoliberalism emerged is crucial for understanding the conditions that led to the downfall of the tobacco program and the loss of tobacco farming in the mountains. This section details how the ideology of the Truman Doctrine fueled a combination of development and capitalism that sought ever-increasing amounts of efficiency in production, ultimately leading to the farm crisis of the 1980s. In the aftermath of the farm crisis, neoliberalism emerged, claiming that marketplace “freedom” from government intervention would correct problems such as the farm crisis. Eventually, these neoliberal goals clashed with the New Deal-era tobacco program, and tobacco farming, like the textile industry of North Carolina, moved to where production was cheapest and most efficient, leaving small farmers, such as those in Bethel, unable to raise tobacco.

After the end of World War II, global capitalism, recently regulated in the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century, began to encounter significant change (Escobar, 1995). By the 1950s, due in part to the independence efforts of former colonies, the increasing recognition of human rights, and to counteract global socialist/communist movements, Western nations and institutions began combining market economics with development

agendas to maintain and expand market and labor control while bringing the underdeveloped world into modernity (Escobar, 1995). At the center of this effort stood the Truman Doctrine, highlighted by Escobar (1995) as the complete restructuring of world affairs. The Truman Doctrine-worldview institutionalized the hierarchy between developed and underdeveloped nations. In its linear, standardized zeal—the antithesis of Scott’s (1998) traditional mode of development—it sought to end hunger, end poverty, and bring the poor to modernization by way of greater production: “the key to prosperity and peace” (Escobar, 1995, p. 3). Moreover, Truman declared, the “key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge” (Escobar, 1995, p. 3).

The effects of the Truman Doctrine had direct impacts on agriculture and industry in America and around the world. After the Farm Bill of 1954, which dismantled price supports and production controls for most commodity crops—but not tobacco—American farms began consolidating, relying more on mechanization and heavy machinery, and taking on more debt, among other things, in order to increase production and efficiency (Berry, 1993a). Greater production in American agriculture necessitated the need for more markets, which in turn were sought abroad. When the grain embargo occurred in the late 1970s, over-extended American agriculture went bust, sparking the farm crisis of the 1980s (Dudley, 2000). Dudley’s (2000) work, *Debt and Dispossession*, chronicles the farm crisis in the Midwest and how competition between farmers, farm consolidation, and increasing amounts of farm debt, among other things, contributed to this crisis. For the purposes of this thesis, Dudley’s work at once shows how the tobacco economy, because of the federal tobacco program, differed from the rest of American agriculture in the 1980s. Furthermore, it foreshadows how

the tobacco economy would look after the end of the program. Many of the same consequences of the 1980s farm crisis now characterize tobacco production in the U.S. (Benson 2012; Kingsolver 2011; Griffith 2009; Stull 2009).

How and why did the tobacco economy succumb to several of the same consequences that stemmed from the farm crisis of the 1980s? The answer, as Benson (2012) thoroughly develops, concerns corporate influence and investment in foreign markets. When the developed world hit its recession in the 1980s, the underdeveloped countries took a blunt hit as well. Adjustable interest rates placed extreme burdens on developing nations, to the point that the repayment of debts—even on the interest—was impossible (Robbins, 2002). In attempting to restructure the repayment of debts, debtor nations often had to increase revenues by increasing taxes, devaluing currency, increasing exports, and by reducing spending on social programs, and this restructuring made domestic goods cost more, while money was worth less and health and social services became more expensive (Robbins, 2002). Essentially, the debt crisis helped create the leverage that developed nations and institutions needed to liberalize underdeveloped economies. By the 1980s, out were state-owned enterprises and redistributive development approaches of third world countries, and in came the free market backed by world institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) (Escobar, 1995). This had the effect of placing any development discourse under the umbrella of market economics and this inherently undervalued local social, cultural, and ecological conditions (Escobar, 1995). These development/investment strategies aimed at economic growth came to rest in the hands of those in power; Escobar (1995) explains that in underdeveloped countries “hunger similarly

grew as the capacity of countries to produce the food necessary to feed themselves contracted under the pressure to produce cash crops, accept cheap food from the West, and conform to agricultural markets dominated by the multinational merchants of grain” (p. 104). In regards to tobacco production, the vulnerability of foreign economies in the 1980s provided tobacco companies with the opportunity to expand international operations and create cheaper supplies of tobacco (Benson, 2012).

Simultaneously in the U.S., the farm crisis itself opened the doors to calls for less regulated trade and production and for the expansion of free markets, ostensibly to maximize economic growth, and this is the free market agenda known as neoliberalism (Benson, 2012; Harvey, 2005). The neoliberal ideology underscores the point that government regulation of markets is a detriment to economic growth (Harvey, 2005). Moreover, free markets supposedly correct themselves in times of economic uncertainty, while government regulation causes disasters such as the farm crisis of the 1980s (Harvey, 2005). At its foundation, neoliberalism coalesces the processes of modern development and capitalism, because its key tenets hold that unregulated trade and production will promote economic growth and well-being in the underdeveloped world (a goal of Truman Doctrine-era development policies) while creating markets for the products of the developed world (creating, for instance, economic growth in the U.S.) (Harvey, 2005). But, this is not the case; neoliberalism has not led to sustained economic growth (Harvey, 2005; Plant, 2010). Instead, in the U.S. for example, neoliberalism has led to the loss of factory jobs and farm jobs which have moved to places where production is cheapest, while simultaneously increasing

corporate profits (Benson, 2012; Berry 1993a; Escobar, 1995; Hamilton & Ryan, 1993; Harvey, 2005; Touraine, 2001).

The neoliberal economic trend has disrupted the agrarian culture and economy of Bethel in many ways. For example, since nearby North Carolina furniture factories have closed and moved offshore in recent years, logging and operating sawmills in Bethel, once a mainstay of Bethel's diversified economy, have declined. There is no longer a local demand for lumber. So too, once tobacco production was deregulated in the U.S. after 2004, tobacco-farming economies have by and large come to resemble other free market industries, including subsidized American agriculture. Where it still exists, tobacco production today is more concentrated, more efficient, more capital-intensive, and labor structure is more hierarchical (Benson, 2012; Griffith, 2009; Kingsolver, 2011; Stull, 2009). For places such as Bethel, where small, one or two acre tobacco patches were the historical norm, neoliberalism has all but ended the culture and economy of tobacco farming. Like the furniture and textile industries in the Piedmont of North Carolina, tobacco farming has moved to where production is cheapest and most profitable for corporations (Benson, 2012).

### **Complex systems theory**

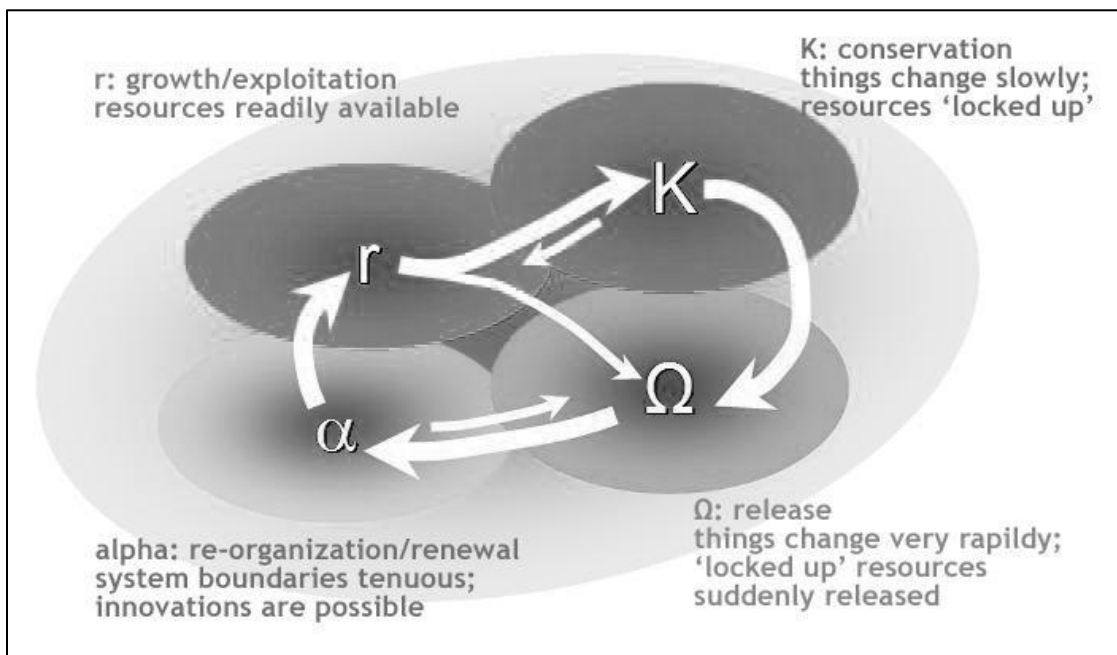
According to Walker & Salt (2006), systems entail “the set of variables together with the interactions between them, and the processes and mechanisms that govern those interactions” (p. 164-165). Central to systems thinking is the concept of resiliency, defined by Walker & Salt (2006) as “the amount of change a system can undergo (its capacity to absorb disturbance) and remain within the same regime—essentially retaining the same structure functions and feedbacks” (p. 165). Systems, whether in regards to an ecological



system, such as a lake or a forest, or a social system, such as the tobacco program, function across scales and according to certain patterns and tendencies: re-organization ( $\alpha$ ), growth ( $r$ ), conservation ( $K$ ), and regime change ( $\Omega$ ) (Walker & Salt, 2006). This is called the adaptive cycle and is pictured in Figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1. The adaptive cycle, double loop

Source: Resilience Alliance, retrieved from: [http://www.resalliance.org/index.php/key\\_concepts](http://www.resalliance.org/index.php/key_concepts)



In the adaptive cycle, the growth phase emerges out of the re-organizational phase and moves quickly to a longer stage of conservation, where forces from across scales pressure the system and the system retains resiliency. At other times, the conservation stage is not reached after the growth phase. At this point, the system releases, going from ( $r$ ) to ( $\Omega$ ), and the system again attempts to reorganize itself into a new stable state/conservation phase. The small loop from ( $\alpha$ ) to ( $r$ ) to ( $\Omega$ ), can occur multiple times before the system reaches a conservation stage ( $K$ ). Once the system reaches the conservation stage, the system

becomes resilient, absorbing pressures and maintaining its basic structure and functions for an extended period. If the pressures become too great, the system begins to lose its resiliency, and the conservation stage gives way to a release (or regime change) phase. Upon release, the system moves into a stage of chaos and change whereby another growth cycle, and a new system, can emerge.

To apply the adaptive cycle to the tobacco economy, the tobacco program functions as a social-ecological system (SES), and thus is most accurately understood within a resilience framework. Understanding social systems in terms of resilience thinking is helpful in several ways. First, resilience thinking embraces a nonlinear, non-static, and diverse explanation of how systems work (Walker & Salt, 2006). Moreover, it views systems across scales, providing a more accurate picture of how a certain system operates and is affected. This perspective counters the notion, for instance, that economies can become continually more efficient and grow indefinitely (Walker & Salt, 2006). This linear trajectory works to standardize systems, making them less diverse and adaptable and therefore more susceptible to rigidity and a potential release phase. This, too, brings us back to the point made by Scott (1998) concerning the differences between traditional and modern development and his call for a framework of development that is less linear and more locally appropriate. Secondly, since resilience thinking provides a better idea of how complex systems operate, we subsequently gain a better understanding of how to manage complex systems (Walker & Salt, 2006). This is important for understanding why the tobacco program was successful for farmers and then deteriorated (see Chapter 3). Lastly, since tobacco farming is nearly gone in the mountains, an understanding of complex systems can be useful in regards to working

towards and maintaining another desirable system, for instance, a stable infrastructure of small and/or organic farms.

### **Conclusion**

To fully grasp the rise and fall of tobacco farming in the mountains, it is necessary to examine the larger economic and global contexts within which this system operated. Several processes have been briefly discussed in this chapter that help accomplish this goal. First, the dichotomy between Scott's (1998) traditional model of development, which emphasizes limits to growth and the cyclical nature of life, and the modern form of development, which emphasizes linearity and standardization without reference to local contexts, is discussed. Scott's (1998) notion of development characterizes Bethel's pre-1930 subsistence-based economy, and its future application holds promise with regard to reinvigorating traditional agrarian economies and cultures in the mountains (see Chapter 4 and 6). Secondly, a brief history of capitalism provides the background for the economic climate surrounding the creation of the federal tobacco program during the 1930s. Moreover, the changing role of capitalism during the twentieth century, especially concerning agriculture and the farm debt crisis of the 1980s, is contrasted by the tobacco program and its egalitarian nature. Thirdly, emerging after the farm crisis and the third world debt crisis, neoliberal policies and actions combined with capitalist and development agendas and resulted in direct foreign investment across the world. This advocacy for "free" markets has come to characterize global industries today. Although the U.S. tobacco economy withstood neoliberalism for several years, tobacco farming in the U.S. is now entirely deregulated. Lastly, tying all of these things together, complex systems theory, which provides a nonlinear, cyclical framework for how

systems function over time, is a helpful model for understanding the rise and fall of the tobacco economy, the tobacco program, and tobacco farming in the mountains. All of these processes show how Bethel's tobacco economy fits within a larger global framework. As this thesis moves forward, this scope continues to narrow, next by examining the federal tobacco program (see Chapter 3) and then by discussing the context of tobacco farming at the local level in Bethel (see Chapters 4 and 5).

## CHAPTER 3: THE TOBACCO PROGRAM: 1938-2004

### **Introduction**

The origins of the tobacco program begin in a regulatory climate not dissimilar to the current neoliberal era that characterizes the tobacco economy. Today's tobacco farming industry is entirely deregulated, just as it was prior to the New Deal of the 1930s. The program has come full-circle: from its origins, to its development, to its decades-long run, and now after its end. As will be explained in greater detail later in this chapter, the tobacco program functioned to control the amount of tobacco on the market and its baseline price on the market. In short, this provided long-term stability for tobacco farmers and made tobacco grown on just a few acres price competitive on the market. This structure has clear implications for small tobacco farmers, and consequently, for tobacco farmers in the Appalachian Mountains, where tobacco allotments have historically been small yet ubiquitous. This chapter will outline how the tobacco program developed, how it functioned, and how key leaders proved influential in the maintenance and fate of the program. This history and analysis will provide the groundwork for an examination in Chapters 4 and 5 of the culture and economy of a mountain tobacco farming community: Bethel, Watauga County, North Carolina.

To begin, this chapter will sketch the climate surrounding tobacco farming prior to the beginning of the program. In the early years of the twentieth century, the development of farmer-operated cooperatives and attempts at production controls and standards spawned the local and regional infrastructure that enabled federal officials to craft tobacco program

legislation. Initially, the 1933 New Deal farm bill, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, of which the tobacco program was one part, was met with opposition, and it took five more years until permanent legislation took effect. After the permanent establishment of the second Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1938, the tobacco program operated continuously until 2004, but in essentially two major phases. Again, it is important to note that there was not one program for all tobacco farming. Specific varieties of tobacco, such as burley, flue-cured, dark, etc., each had their own programs and their own marketing and price support structures and were managed by their own cooperatives. In the section that covers the burley tobacco program from 1938-1971, I describe the basic structure of the tobacco program, its goals, and how it functioned. During this time, the program controlled tobacco production by controlling the amount of tobacco acreage planted. I examine how this system changed over time and how the acreage allotments led to the near-collapse of the burley program. In the next section, covering the program in the 1970s, I examine how key leaders addressed the acreage allotment problems of the 1960s. These years also saw a changing of the guard concerning political leadership. By the 1980s, tobacco company influence had altered the way political leaders addressed the mounting criticism of the program. Relying on the work of anthropologist Peter Benson (2012), who has conducted significant research with regards to the tobacco economy in the U.S., I address how tobacco company influence changed the nature of the program in the 1980s and 1990s. Out of these years, a neoliberal movement toward the deregulation of tobacco production emerged, and in 2004, the program ended, with no regulatory guidelines and with little of the initially proposed economic concessions for farmers. Currently, with no federal tobacco program, tobacco farmers grow in an

unregulated, risky environment that favors larger operations where tobacco can be grown cheaper and more efficiently. This new environment is unfavorable for mountain tobacco farmers who have traditionally grown small allotments.

### **Unregulated tobacco: 1890s-1930s**

By the 1890s, the tobacco economy was controlled by James B. Duke's American Tobacco Company (ATC), a massive conglomeration of tobacco manufacturing companies. Commonly referred to as "the trust," American Tobacco controlled 86 percent of the cigarette market by 1910, and, by being well capitalized, ATC aggressively cut market prices, undercut competition, and then bought the competition out (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). For tobacco farmers, American Tobacco's monopoly provided fluctuating market prices and low returns on crops, and farmers often would not make enough to cover their costs. Still, during the early years of the twentieth century, demand for tobacco continued to rise while prices for the crop continued to fluctuate (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998).

To counter the trust, tobacco farmers in Kentucky and Tennessee began to organize in the early twentieth century, forming cooperative groups to collectively sell their tobacco in hopes of getting better prices. Not all farmers wanted to sell their tobacco with cooperatives, and enough growers held out, selling to the trust and undermining the viability of the cooperatives. In response, cooperative farmers began raiding non-cooperative farmers in the dark tobacco region of western Kentucky and west Tennessee (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). These "night riders" eventually shifted their efforts from non-cooperative farmers to

the power structure itself, attacking company warehouses and laying waste to company facilities (“400 night riders,” 1907).

Similar developments occurred in the burley producing region of central Kentucky in the early twentieth century as farmers tried to organize and pool their burley tobacco crops, though resistance here was less violent and pooling efforts more successful than in the western region (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). Between 1902 and 1910, burley growers had some success pooling their crops, but could not negotiate a sale with the trust. This led in 1908 to the “cut-out,” where burley growers *en masse* did not grow tobacco and thus withheld the crop from the market. This action worked for the cooperative, and the trust bought the stored cooperative crops of the previous years. In 1911, antitrust laws broke up American Tobacco, but cooperative efforts still did not find permanent success (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998).

The boom years of World War I brought high prices to tobacco markets and farmers but did not lead to the development of any farmer-led marketing organizations. When the war years ended, tobacco prices, like other commodity prices, dropped significantly. After the war, cooperative movements reemerged. One group, the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association (centered in Kentucky), gained some ground, establishing grading systems and high membership rates, but under-capitalization, non-cooperative tobacco, and lack of production controls undermined the cooperative’s overall effectiveness. In the end, the Great Depression would usher in the circumstances necessary to stabilize American agriculture and tobacco farming (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998).



### **The birth of the tobacco program: 1933-1938**

In 1933, Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and enacted parity legislation to stabilize the American farming economy as part of President Roosevelt's first "Hundred Days" (Badger, 1980). The measures were bold and against corporate interests: production of commodity crops was controlled and floor prices were backed by government support (Badger, 1980; Berry, 1993a). The AAA affected the biggest industries in agriculture, such as corn, wheat, cotton, and tobacco, but only in tobacco did the AAA have widespread farmer support (Campbell, 1962). Elsewhere in the country, the measures were more contentious (Badger, 1980; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998).

One of the more progressive aspects of the development of the AAA tobacco plan involved what Badger (1980) calls "economic democracy." In developing the plan for removing the surplus tobacco crop from the 1933 flue-cured tobacco market, the leaders of the AAA advocated direct farmer suggestions and proposals: if the growers wanted the AAA to do something, write it up and send it on and the AAA would examine it. Because of the work of the cooperatives over the years, tobacco growers at this time were already organized at the local and regional levels. They could, in effect, make proposals within their groups, and their group leadership could parley those requests to the AAA. Broadly, this interplay between the government and the growers' groups mirrors the attempts at participatory development currently being employed in sustainable agriculture movements in Appalachia today and corresponds to several of John Gaventa's and Rosemary McGee's (2010) propositions concerning how citizen activism can influence national policy. This is a theme I will address more thoroughly in the conclusion to this thesis (see Chapter 6). In 1933, grower

participation in the program's development process led to grower support for the production control measures they (growers) were eventually presented with by the AAA (Badger, 1980). Overall, the measures designed by the AAA built upon the work and goals of the cooperatives from the early twentieth century, and the passage of the 1933 bill indicates the extent to which government action "transformed the marketing position of the tobacco grower. In persuading the growers to sign up to reduce their acreage, the federal government did what state governments and the growers had long wanted to do" (Badger, 1980, p. 71). Government support provided transformational stability for tobacco farmers and market protection from the previously unrestrained forces of the tobacco manufactures. Looking back, the cooperatives, on their own, could only do so much to protect tobacco farmers and create stable livelihoods. To get to that next level, the growers needed the power and guarantee of the government in their corner.

As another part of the 1933 farm bill, the federal government created the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), which made loans to tobacco cooperatives and farmers. And as an example of the broad ranging effects of the New Deal legislation, Roosevelt's administration established a national grain reserve which allowed the government to protect against high consumer prices during times of low supply (Berry, 1993b). Despite these gains, the AAA proved controversial, and the 1933 act was not permanently successful.

The development of the AAA into permanent legislation took several years and many contentious discussions on local and national scales but eventually secured a favorable economic situation for tobacco growers. Yet, not all people involved in tobacco farming subsequently benefitted. Tobacco controls in the 1930s essentially "froze" who could grow

tobacco and who could not (Berry, 1993b). Quotas, which detailed how many acres of tobacco tobacco farmers could grow, were tied to the land, and the landowners who grew tobacco prior to 1933 reaped the benefits of the program. Moreover, small growers feared they would be permanently constrained to small acreages (Mann, 1975). In North Carolina, small flue-cured growers were unhappy with the flat acreage cut rate proposed by the 1933 act (Badger, 1980). To decrease the amount of tobacco on the market (and thereby to raise its price), federal legislation proposed a flat percentage cut on every tobacco farmer's acreage. Small growers claimed this flat cut on acreage was more detrimental to them than to the large growers. In theory, a ten percent reduction in acreage affects the farmer with ten acres more acutely than the farmer with 100 acres. Small growers feared that they would shoulder a disproportionate amount of the acreage reduction burden and that they might forever be stuck with just a few acres of tobacco, limiting their chances to expand operations, raise larger crops, and achieve economic prosperity (Badger, 1980).

Along with the grievances of small growers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and black farmers found themselves on the short end of the stick (Badger, 1980). In eastern North Carolina, and likely in other parts of the state and region, the tobacco program cemented the racial and social structures in place in the 1930s (Badger, 1980; Kingsolver, 2007). But, the New Deal policies had less to do with agrarian reform and more to do with economic recovery. Though rightly open to criticism for not working for more social and economic change, the New Deal policies of the 1930s, in light of the political obstacles they faced, could only do so much: the choice was between a limited program or no program at all (Badger, 1980). This is a theme that will continue to emerge throughout this chapter.

In 1934 and 1935, national and local level tobacco groups politicked for and against government grade standards, inspections, processing taxes, and warehouse and auction reforms, among other things (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). As well, corporate interests lobbied against any program and production control measures (Berry, 1993a). But, grower support for these measures played heavily into the determination of the program's fate. The AAA argued that if the growers and their cooperatives supported the government sponsored grading system, then the AAA would work towards achieving those ends. This shows the importance of cooperation between local level groups and national level agencies and the crucial role of having key leaders (who support the local level) in positions of power and influence (Gaventa & McGee, 2010). The tobacco program likely could not have developed and been maintained for decades in any other way.

As gains were being made for farmers, manufacturer efforts worked to sideline the program, and the constitutionality of the AAA was challenged on the national level. In 1936, the U.S. Supreme Court in *U.S. v. Butler* struck down production controls and processing taxes as unconstitutional, thus ending the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act before its effects could be felt (Badger, 1980). Tobacco growers and tobacco congressmen were outraged; plans were immediately made to revive the tobacco program and efforts focused on organizing tobacco farmers in the Farm Bureau, working for permanent production control legislation, and permanently replacing the AAA, among other strategies (Badger, 1980). Working towards another AAA took two years (1936-1938), because, much to the frustration of tobacco states, most of the contentiousness surrounding the New Deal farm legislation concerned other commodities, such as wheat, cotton, and corn. Because tobacco growers

near-unanimously supported control measures, and because a tobacco program would not affect other commodity crop prices, tobacco legislation had a relatively easy time gaining acceptance in the proposed national farm bill of 1938 (Campbell, 1962). Because of disunity among farm organizations and the lack of an economic emergency, once proposed, passing the 1938 AAA took over a year (Badger, 1980).

### **The burley tobacco program, 1938-1971**

The tobacco program is not one program for all tobacco, but several programs for different varieties of tobacco (i.e., a burley program and a flue-cured program; Mann, 1975). For the purposes of this thesis, any reference to the tobacco program, unless otherwise noted, refers to the burley tobacco program. So, how does the tobacco program work? The 1938 farm bill legislation “authorized sources of credit to lend money to farmer co-operatives, which would, in turn, make loans to farmers on all tobacco that did not bring the government support price” (Berry, 1993b, p. 62). This marked the beginning of the tobacco program and the long-term cross-scale cooperation between the national government and local and regional farm cooperatives (Gaventa and McGee, 2010). At a basic level, the program did three things.

First, farmer participation in the program controlled tobacco production: quota cards were issued to tobacco growers detailing the amount of acreage on which they were allowed to grow tobacco (Badger, 1980; Berry, 1993b). This system was voluntary, and voted in by the growers every three years, but the structure of the tobacco economy made growing under quota (basically) mandatory in order for farmers to make any profit. To keep farmers in the program, the government levied heavy taxes on non-program tobacco, to the point that

tobacco growers had to participate in the program (Badger, 1980; Berry, 1993b). To control production, as mentioned above, flat cuts on tobacco acreage occurred, limiting the amount of tobacco in the program and on the market. Acreage allotments were initially assigned based on historic tobacco production and the extent of cropland (Mann, 1975). In 1943 and 1944, Congress raised the minimum allotment size for burley growers because of the high demand for cigarettes during World War II (Mann, 1975). After the war, acreage allotments were reduced as the marked demand for burley began to decline and as production yields per acre continued to increase. Through a series of complex political maneuverings in the late 1940s and early 1950s that aimed to steady the burley program, the minimum protected acreage of tobacco was reduced from one acre to seven-tenths of an acre in 1953. Any tobacco acreage at this amount could not be further reduced. Still, the seven-tenths minimum was reduced to a half-acre minimum in 1955 as growers overwhelmingly approved the reduction by referendum, ostensibly to avoid the end of the program. Mann (1975) writes that this policy, in effect, established the principle of protecting the small burley grower over and above the large grower, a principle that characterized the program for decades to come. As the program evolved, small burley growers developed into a powerful enough voting bloc that they could conceivably vote out the tobacco program if they chose to do so. This was the fear of some growers and leaders in the burley tobacco economy. Furthermore, growers continued to increase tobacco yields per acre, putting more and more burley on the market. This added to the mounting instability of the program, but more on this development in a moment (Mann, 1975).

In addition to acreage allotments, second, the government established negotiated price floors for tobacco. These price floors were set during the New Deal and based until 1985 on parity prices that took into account production costs and provided farmers with a stable and secure price received (Berry, 1993a; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). The government did not pay out money to tobacco growers, as in traditional subsidies, but guaranteed a certain price for specific grades of tobacco (within specific varieties of tobacco: burley, flue-cured, dark, etc.). For the tobacco to sell at auction, it had to bring at least a penny above the minimum support price. Since everyone participated in the program, this price support system kept tobacco growers from undercutting each other and the companies from undercutting the growers, solving one of the problems that had plagued the cooperatives in the early twentieth century (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998).

If tobacco at auction did not sell for the baseline support price, then, third, farmer-operated cooperatives bought the tobacco under loan, with those loans made available through the CCC, and the loaned tobacco was then held by the cooperative (Badger, 1980; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). The cooperative re-dried and stored the tobacco, reselling it whenever possible. If the cooperative-held tobacco sold for more than the principle of the loan plus interest and costs, any excess profit went back to the farmer (Berry, 1993b; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998).

Over the course of the tobacco program, government agencies helped farmers with credit, assistance, resource conservation, and quota management, among other things. In the 1960s the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) established the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS; Mann, 1975). It ran until 1994 and worked

with farmers towards farm stability, resource conservation, and helped manage the tobacco quota system. In 1995 the USDA reorganized and shifted the ASCS and other programs to the newly created Farm Service Agency (FSA; “About FSA,” 2008). The ASCS, reflecting national tobacco farm policy, valued local participation during its run from 1961 to 1994. Each state had an ASCS committee, and district committees were nested under that. These districts were made up of county committees, in turn made up of community committees (Mann, 1975). Over time, some consolidation occurred at the county and community levels, but the production control program continued to be administered at the county level (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). This committee had some say in the adjustment of marketing allotments, dealt with farmer grievances and problems, and coordinated the allocation of marketing quotas. This widespread participation effort provided growers with a voice in decision-making and was structured so that local concerns could scale up to the national level and become real policy or law (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). Furthermore, cooperative groups, such as the Burley Stabilization Corporation (BSC), which was the cooperative for North Carolina burley growers, managed tobacco pools, administered the program, and worked hand in hand with these government agencies and their agents (personal communication, R.G. Shipley, 2012).

Returning to the discussion of the tobacco program’s structure, from 1941 to 1971 the burley tobacco program was controlled by acreage allotments—burley growers’ quota cards allowed for farmers to grow a half acre, three acres, ten acres, etc. of tobacco. Over time, farmers became increasingly adept at maximizing yield per acre, for instance, by planting tobacco plants closer together and by using more fertilizers. This raised their pounds/acre of



tobacco and resulted in continual overproduction, which meant more tobacco was being taken on loan (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). Since limiting production meant cutting allotments of individual acreage, this strategy pushed more and more farmers toward smaller allotments (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). By the mid-1960s, overproduction and reduced acreage was creating serious problems for the burley tobacco program, and steps were taken to create legislation that would switch the burley allotments from acreage to poundage quotas (Mann, 1975). This proposed switch (which had already occurred in the flue-cured program in the 1940s) meant that burley farmers would be limited as to how many pounds of tobacco they grew, as opposed to how many acres (or half-acres). But, since small growers were already capped at a half-acre and could grow as many pounds on that allotment as they could, they felt they would lose their material advantage to larger operations by switching to poundage. So, when this proposal came up for referendum in 1967, burley growers, consisting of a large percentage of small growers, voted it down. The major supply problems of the program were not resolved (Mann, 1975).

By 1970, the dire situation of the burley program had grown worse, and in response, a group of key tobacco leaders, headed by Granville Stokes, a University of Kentucky College of Agriculture associate dean, farm bureau leaders, and others, began meeting regularly to brainstorm a solution to the problem (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). The result was another proposal that outlined the switch from an acreage control system to a poundage system. Yet, this proposal lacked some of the more small-grower friendly measures that were included in the initial 1967 proposal (Mann, 1975; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). In May 1971, a referendum was held and burley growers overwhelmingly approved the switch to

poundage (along with a few other changes), and the work of the tobacco leaders became federal legislation, saving the burley program (Mann, 1975; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). Why did the small burley growers reject the switch to poundage in 1967 but approve it in 1971? According to Mann (1975), by 1971, “the choice was not poundage or the old program, it was poundage or *no* program” (p. 70). Here again we see how close the program came to ending, and how the work of key leaders helped maintain the program’s existence.

The switch to poundage allotments helped the program, namely, by saving it from ruin (Mann, 1975; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). Up until the 1970s, the cooperatives had been taking on more tobacco than they could resell as farmers continued to produce more pounds per acre. And, since acreage allotments could not be reduced any less than a half-acre, as more farmers approached the half-acre minimum, key leaders saw that the situation clearly would not resolve itself (Mann, 1975). The cooperative pools were saturated with too much tobacco, and something had to be done or the program looked ready to implode. The result was the switch to poundage allotments. In addition to poundage, the 1971 burley referendum also included the passage of a “lease and transfer” of allotment proposal, which had already been utilized in the flue-cured program since 1961 (Mann, 1975). For the first time, the lease and transfer option permitted burley tobacco growers to lease the poundage quota of other quota holders—within their county—and plant that leased allotment on their (the lessee’s) land. This provided burley growers the opportunity to expand their operations, although within limits. For other quota holders, lease and transfer allowed for them to profit from the value of their quota without having to grow tobacco (i.e., by leasing it to another farmer; Mann, 1975). Examining in closer detail the lease and transfer system also sheds

light on the changing dynamics of tobacco farming, and agriculture, in the U.S. by the 1970s. Across the country, hundreds of thousands of farmers were leaving farming and fewer farmers were raising increasing amounts of commodity crops. These changes made to the tobacco program in 1971 had clear impacts on the next thirty-plus years of the tobacco program, and it is to this discussion that I now turn.

### **Changes to the program: the 1970s**

The 1971 lease and transfer system for burley tobacco came with a few stipulations. First, quotas could only be leased to farmers already in possession of their own permanent base poundage. This provision was included in order to protect the historic/past tobacco farmers' claims to tobacco production from "new" or "outside" growers (Mann, 1975). Second, in spite of some attempts to introduce inter-county leasing into the 1971 program amendments, lease and transfer of quotas could only take place within counties. For example, a tobacco farmer in Bethel, Watauga County, could only lease a tobacco quota from a quota holder within Watauga County. A Watauga County farmer could not lease poundage from a quota holder in neighboring Ashe County. Third, farmers could only lease up to 15,000 pounds of tobacco. This provision capped fears that leasing would consolidate burley farms into larger and larger operations (Mann, 1975).

In addition to the poundage allotments and the lease and transfer system, the 1971 changes also included a "carry-over" system (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). This carry-over provision allowed for farmers to sell up to 110 percent of their quota in a given year (lowered to 103 percent in 1985; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). Any tobacco sold over the 100 percent of allotment was then deducted from the next year's quota (van Willigen &

Eastwood, 1998). If a farmer in Bethel had a quota for 4,000 pounds of tobacco in 1972, and they sold 4,400 pounds, ten percent over their quota, then, their quota for the following year, 1973, would be ten percent less. The inverse was also true: if a farmer grew less than their poundage quota, the following year they could add that unsold amount to their base quota. This provision limited farmers from accumulating more than one hundred percent of their quota for use in the next year. If a crop failed in 1972, and only twenty-five percent of the quota was sold, the next year, 1973, the remaining seventy-five percent of 1972's quota could be sold along with the 1973 pounds. This is one of the areas where the ASCS office helped farmers navigate the waters of the tobacco program (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998).

As much as these provisions helped save the program, and in many cases made it better going forward for farmers and for non-farming quota holders, it also deemphasized the burley program's historic favoring of the small grower (Mann, 1975). The lease and transfer provisions, as feared by some small growers and their defendants, eventually did move tobacco production away from smaller operations and toward areas characterized by larger allotments and more dense production patterns (Mann, 1975). In one way, especially concerning production patterns, this may be why Bethel has remained the last tobacco growing community in Watauga County. As more tobacco farmers quit raising the crop, their quotas went to areas where tobacco farming was most entrenched. I will return to this theme in Chapter 5. Still, these provisions in burley were less acute than in flue-cured tobacco farming. Rather quickly in the early 1970s, flue-cured farming became mechanized, more farms consolidated, and increasing numbers of tenant farmers and small growers were

pushed out or were already leaving farm work. Mann (1975) provided a thorough analysis of how these factors contributed to the distribution of benefits within tobacco farming in the early 1970s, in both the burley and flue-cured economies. He projected that modifications to the program worked to modestly level the distribution of benefits while technological advancements worked in the opposite way, concentrating the program's benefits, as tended to be the case in flue-cured regions. As time has gone by, it is clear that Mann's (1975) projections were accurate, especially in light of the buyout and the loss of the program in 2004. To understand the conditions that led to the program's downfall, it's necessary to examine the changes that took place in the tobacco program during the 1980s and 1990s.

### **The program in the 1980s and 1990s**

Despite all of the changes to the program that took place in the early 1970s, by the 1980s many of the same problems had yet to be corrected; specifically, cooperatives continued to take on more tobacco while loans went unpaid and accrued interest (Benson, 2012). This instability added to the already complex set of factors swirling around tobacco farming and tobacco consumption in the United States at this time. In response to mounting criticism from health-related groups and from neoliberals with regards to the government's role in supporting tobacco production, another change was made to the program in 1982, this time, through a "no-net-cost" provision. Citing White (1988), Benson (2012) describes no-net-cost and how it ultimately did not allay the stresses on the program:

Theoretically, tobacco farmers would finance the guaranteed minimum prices for their unsold leaf through a three-cent per-pound assessment on all leaf sold at auction. These funds would then go to the co-ops and enable a self-sustaining safety net

system. But this compromise only worsened things. There were no incentives for tobacco companies to purchase more domestic leaf, much less a critical discussion of the international free trade agreements that facilitated tobacco leaf globalization. (p. 99)

When the first assessments failed to cover the loan costs for unsold tobacco, the next year's assessment on farmers was raised to seven cents per pound. This added cost forced thousands of tobacco farmers on the edge of economic stability out of business (Benson, 2012).

The changes that came with no-net-cost also provide a good opportunity to transition to a broader and more dynamic discussion of the tobacco program. The program had always operated within a larger economic and political system, but by the 1980s, wider and more contentious factors began to influence the political decisions that ultimately determined the downfall of the program. All of these factors had one common thread: ending the federal government's direct role in the production and manufacturing of tobacco. Health-advocacy groups fought against tobacco use and the government's involvement in supporting tobacco production. Fiscal conservatives were against a big government program (a major reason for the no-net-cost provision). And, emerging neoliberal market forces pursued cheaper tobacco production in foreign markets and worked to deregulate U.S. tobacco production (Benson, 2012).

One of the most consequential changes that occurred during the 1980s revolves around key leadership. For decades, political leaders from tobacco states often worked in the best interest of their tobacco farming constituencies, and some of these leaders even worked for the best interest of small growers. Mann (1975) writes that during the lease and transfer

debates, one senator from Kentucky, John Cooper, who had long sought to protect the interests of small burley growers, lamented the inevitable consolidation of farms, and the ultimate loss of smaller and poorer farms, that initiatives such as lease and transfer would eventually bring. The small growers' defender retired from Congress in 1972, and in symbol as well as practice, Cooper's retirement signifies a major shift in congressional support for tobacco farmers. Increasingly during the 1970s and early 1980s, congressional leadership favored the views and strategies of tobacco companies over the equitable aspects of the program and the welfare of tobacco farmers (Benson, 2012). Perhaps the first major example of this shift in loyalties surfaced with the passage of a 1985 omnibus bill, which included a section crafted by Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, that, among other things, changed how the USDA formulated quota levels: instead of the baseline price of tobacco being based on domestic consumption and leaf exports, new quota levels were based on the purchase intentions of tobacco companies. While ostensibly crafted to save the tobacco program, this legislation, in reality, worked to the long-term detriment of tobacco farmers and the long-term benefit of tobacco companies. Concerning this point, Benson (2012) gives a thorough examination of tobacco company influence over tobacco leaders (and over the entire framing of tobacco farming dialogue), analyzing these dynamics to show how U.S. tobacco companies undermined American tobacco farmers. Benson's (2012) work should be consulted for a better understanding of these processes.

Taking one of Benson's (2012) conclusions and combining it with one of Mann's (1975) projections from earlier in the chapter provides the necessary framework from which to view the changing trajectory of the tobacco program after 1985. This will then set up the

later discussion of how the loss of the program negatively impacted tobacco farmers in Bethel. Much of Mann's (1975) work characterizes the tobacco program as a program that should and could be used to provide an equitable income for as many tobacco farmers as possible. The program was, after all, initially designed to bring stability to American farmers and the economy. Yet, inequalities have always existed within the program and tobacco farming (who gets to grow the crop, for example), even though the tobacco program was often more equitable in practice than other agricultural sectors (Benson, 2012; Griffith, 2009; Kingsolver, 2007; Mann, 1975). But, precisely at the time that Mann (1975) calls for an overhaul in the program's structure that could redistribute the program's benefits more evenly, a different change occurred: tobacco-state politicians, under the influence of tobacco companies, began drafting policies that favored neoliberal goals over and above the economic situation of tobacco farmers and tobacco workers (Benson, 2012). Addressing the situation immediately following Senator Helms' bill of 1985, Benson (2012) writes:

Tobacco companies were effectively in charge of the government tobacco program. Helms had done nothing to address the underlying structural conditions of trade that negatively affected the North Carolina tobacco economy or to contain tobacco companies in their understandable goal of further integrating international distribution and production. Over the course of the 1990s, their intensified sourcing of foreign leaf drove the program into the ground while deepening economic competition and desperation among North Carolina growers. (p. 107)

The situation for tobacco farmers in the 1990s was increasingly grim (Brown, 1995; Tiller, 2002; Wellons, 2001). Much like the farm crisis that ravaged the Midwest in the



1980s, the 1990s proved detrimental to the livelihoods of tobacco farmers (Benson, 2012; Dudley, 2000). Large growers were taking on more debt, more risk, and going bust more frequently; small growers were being outpaced and leaving tobacco farming in large numbers (Benson, 2012; Tiller, 2002). Again, changes to the economy of tobacco farming played a key role in these disturbances. For example, from 1990 to 1993, foreign leaf imports grew from 400 million pounds to over one billion pounds (Wood, 1998). In response to mounting concerns over foreign leaf imports, a law was included in a 1993 omnibus bill that required U.S. manufactured cigarettes to contain, at minimum, seventy-five percent of U.S. grown tobacco (Skully, 2000). The pressures for the bill came from, among others, growers, because of the potential of declining U.S. leaf prices due to cheaper world leaf, and, ironically, from anti-smoking groups, who were concerned that increased imports of cheaper foreign leaf, used in cheaper cigarettes, would result in an increased number of smokers (Skully, 2000). This law, however, conflicted with policies from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). After the U.S. approved GATT in 1994, a 1995 U.S. law did more than simply repeal the seventy-five percent domestic minimum, which would have merely returned the tobacco market to the pre-1994 status quo. The 1995 law instead instituted a tariff rate quota (TRQ), which allocated the percentage of tobacco foreign countries could export to U.S. manufacturers at low or no tariff (Brown, 1995; Skully, 2000).

Then, from 1997 to 2001, U.S. burley production was cut drastically (Stull, 2009; Tiller, 2002; Wellons, 2001). In 1998, basic quota for burley fell 9.8%. That number was cut by 28% in 1999, and in 2000, production was cut by another 43% (Tiller, 2002). This decline in basic quota accelerated the instability of the program, and in response, active growers did

all they could to stay profitable. Leasing quotas continued to be one way for growers to attempt to make a profit, but quotas became more expensive as lessors made up the lost money from reduced quota values by raising the price to lease their poundage base (Tiller, 2002). Those that were raising larger tracts of burley tobacco, then, had to deal with more and more quota holders just to scrape together enough poundage to make a decent profit. I discuss this trend and its implications in Bethel in more detail in Chapter 5. Moreover, tobacco companies were beginning to contract directly with tobacco farmers during the late 1990s and early 2000s, further eroding another pillar of the tobacco program (Tiller, 2002; Wellons, 2001). Instead of farmers selling their tobacco to companies at auction, companies began setting contracts with individual farmers prior to the growing season to buy their allotted tobacco. As long as the farmers stayed within the parameters of their quota, the structure of the program allowed them to sell straight to the companies (Wellons, 2001). Though this brought moderately better prices for contracting farmers in the short term, remembering that at that time contracted prices from the company were still at or above the minimum floor price, direct contracting further undermined the program and the auction system. Once the floor prices were eliminated in 2004, companies had no reason to offer farmers the same high, competitive prices of the program years. By the late 1990s, contracting was commonplace in other areas of agriculture that were less regulated than tobacco. This system is indicative of the shift in tobacco from a cooperative, equitably based tobacco economy to a competitive, individual, free market agricultural era (Wellons, 2001). These factors, and certainly many others, contributed significantly to the decline of burley

tobacco farming in the mountains and led directly to the end of the federal tobacco program in 2004.

### **The buyout of the tobacco program**

*“It was a classic case of a government committee making evidenced-based proposals and politicians, beholden to powerful corporations and working with constituencies swayed by defining ideologies, instead legislating watered-down, almost meaningless, or rather dangerous policy.”*

*Peter Benson (2012, p.116)*

Throughout the 1990s, tobacco companies increasingly influenced the direction and status of the tobacco program. Their influence continues to extend in the post-buyout era. After 1985, tobacco farming, which Wood (1998) calls the tobacco industry’s least profitable sector, continued to be dominated by maneuverings of corporate tobacco. When congressional proposals to end the program were brought forth in the 1990s, the political power of tobacco companies shot them down, because, in the case of a 1998 bill proposed by Senator John McCain, the concessions to farmers were too generous and the restrictions on production and international competition were too rigorous for the liking of tobacco companies (Benson, 2012). Another attempt at policy change, the Clinton-era report *Tobacco at a Crossroads*, was similarly out-maneuvered politically. Both of these proposals included “the elimination of the quota system, cash infusions to growers funded by an excise tax, an incentive program to encourage crop diversification... and the ongoing support of domestic leaf prices subsidized by financial assessments on growers” (Benson, 2012, p. 116). These examples are just a few of the aspects of the proposals (which, again, entailed taxes and payments from companies) that sought to end the floundering program while maintaining the economic livelihoods of tobacco communities and agrarian areas. Other groups, like the

Community Farm Alliance (CFA) in Kentucky and Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD) in southwestern Virginia also worked towards developing policies aimed at alternative crops and infrastructure in tobacco-dependent communities, among other initiatives (Billings, Fitzgerald, & Markowitz, 2010; Flaccavento, 2010; Hamilton & Ryan, 1993). However, the proposal that passed in 2004—the bill that’s now known as the buyout—included none of the above recommendations or goals (Benson, 2012).

By the 2000s, talk of a buyout of the tobacco program was ever-present. Bills were constantly proposed that sought to end the New Deal program and replace it with varying degrees of production controls and compensation (both economic and fiscal) for farmers and farming communities (Benson, 2012; Wood, 1998). In the end, the bill that passed in 2004 was a golden-child of neoliberal ideals: tobacco production in the United States was no longer controlled by any government regulations. Except for funding the ten billion dollar concession payments to quota holders, which was billions less than amounts put forth in previous buyout proposals, tobacco companies achieved all of their desired goals and got a company-friendly, completely deregulated tobacco economy (Benson, 2012). Tobacco farming had finally caught up to the rest of American agriculture. According to Griffith (2009), the changes that occurred in the tobacco economy “in a single year, replicated what has occurred in U.S. agriculture generally over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 435). Recalling the processes of the adaptive cycle from the previous chapter, with the buyout of 2004, the tobacco economy left its conservation stage (k), characterized by the stable and resilient years of the tobacco program, and quickly released, ( $\Omega$ ) entering into a new phase of a reorganization of the tobacco farming system ( $\alpha$ ).

The effects of the buyout in the reorganization phase ( $\alpha$ ) were felt immediately in the American tobacco economy. High U.S. tobacco prices fell drastically down to world price levels, farms immediately consolidated, and in small producer areas, such as in the Appalachian Mountains, the majority of farmers quit raising tobacco. Yet, farmers, farm groups, tobacco-state newspapers, and others, roundly applauded the 2004 buyout. Benson (2012) attributes this response to the extent in which the marketing strategy of the tobacco companies had seeped into every aspect of the tobacco economy. Through the influence of key politicians and farm leaders, the talking points of the companies had become the talking points of the tobacco-farming infrastructure (Benson, 2012). In Bethel, where I conducted my fieldwork, another dynamic of this process is represented. Some farmers there said that they were just “tired” of the buyout talks: if the government or the companies or whoever wanted to end the program—then just end it. But, for small growers, ending the tobacco program meant the loss of tobacco farming. Without price supports and marketing quotas, there was nothing to keep their tobacco, grown in small allotments, competitive with tobacco from larger operations. Neoliberal attitudes and policies, pushed by the tobacco companies, proved decisive by 2004. Historically, the program always had its problems, but those problems had always been resolved, to varying extents, with the goal of maintaining the program. After 1985 and for the next twenty years, the program seemed perpetually threatened. The neoliberal policies set in motion by the 1985 restructuring of the program came to total fruition in 2004. The program ended and a new system of tobacco farming began.

## Conclusion

One of the themes of this chapter, and one of the ways to tell the story of the tobacco program, concerns the strong connections between the national and local levels and the important roles played by key leaders and local/regional groups in maintaining the tobacco program. As sketched in this chapter, the success of the program came in large part from the prior organization and work of farmer-operated tobacco cooperatives in the early twentieth century. Their prior mobilization and goals (i.e., the implementation of a grading system, attempts at production controls) were carried over into national legislation in 1933 (Badger, 1980; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). Achieving a permanent program came largely from the work of key leaders in the AAA who wanted reform. They worked to mobilize the local level, which also wanted a government program, and with both groups pushing together, the unconstitutionality of the tobacco program was reversed in 1938 (Badger, 1980). This two-way street of communication helped put farmers in the best possible situation from a legislative standpoint by protecting their interests from corporate power and market fluctuations. It was in this spirit that the program operated for much of the twentieth century (Mann, 1975).

From 1938 until the early 1970s, the structure of the burley program favored small growers (Mann, 1975). In order to control the amount of burley on the market, the program controlled the amount of acreage tobacco farmers could plant. However, with improving growing techniques and chemical sprays and fertilizers, farmers became more adept at raising tobacco, and their yields subsequently increased. In response, the government continued to cut acreage allotments, pushing more and more burley growers towards the

baseline allotment of a half-acre. Though this made raising burley equitable for lots of small farmers, the effects of reduced acreage also undermined the stability of the program (ibid.). By 1970, the burley program was on the verge of collapse.

Again, the role of key actors, led by university and state farm bureau officials and others, was important to the survival of the program. In the interest of their states, counties, constituencies, and neighbors, these leaders worked together to resolve the problems of the acreage allotment system, drafting a workable poundage system for burley tobacco (Mann, 1975; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). This work was passed as legislation by the 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress in April of 1971 and approved by two-thirds of growers (as required for passage) in a referendum (Cochrane & Ryan, 1976). The new poundage burley program, along with other modifications, saved the tobacco program and the livelihoods and ways of life of many growers, but it also ushered in a different era of tobacco farming.

By the 1980s, corporate influence in tobacco politics was pervasive. Key congressional leadership from tobacco states, who in the 1960s and 1970s had often worked for the benefit of tobacco farmers, now catered to the goals of tobacco companies (Benson, 2012; Mann, 1975). Major changes to the structure of the program in the 1980s and 1990s, including a new formula for calculating quota levels and increased imports of foreign leaf, benefitted tobacco companies more than tobacco farmers (Benson, 2012). Although the program was still dealing with its structural problems (i.e., too much tobacco going unsold at auction and being bought on loan), these new policies did little to shore up the equity of the program that had characterized it for decades, as mounting criticism of tobacco use and the tobacco program grew. Sensing the writing on the wall, regional farm groups, such as the

Community Farm Alliance (CFA) in Kentucky, began advocating for rural economic development, crop diversification plans, and fair transitions away from tobacco farming, but increasingly, congressional politics undermined these goals by evading bills that proposed a modified regulatory climate for tobacco production and reasonable concessions to farmers (Benson, 2012; Hamilton & Ryan, 1993). By the late 1990s, the end of the program was imminent (Tiller, 2002). Burley production in the U.S. fell drastically from 1997 to 2000, approximately 65% according to Wellons (2001), and as fewer farmers were raising tobacco, those still growing leased more and more quota, and those quota-lease prices continued to rise. Furthermore, the cost of inputs, gasoline, fertilizers, sprays, etc., continued to escalate, exacerbating the economic situation of tobacco farmers. After years of failed proposals, the tobacco program finally ended in 2004. According to Benson (2012), the buyout of the program was a neoliberal coup for tobacco companies.

As I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, this transition to a free market tobacco economy significantly altered the tobacco farming landscape. High U.S. tobacco prices fell markedly down to world price levels. In eastern North Carolina, where flue-cured production is heavily concentrated, farms immediately consolidated and production increased (Benson, 2012). In the mountains, however, where small growers with a few tobacco acres predominated, tobacco farmers simply could not compete with the prices of free market tobacco. Without the program, there was no mandate for companies to buy tobacco from small growers. In a deregulated market, tobacco companies could source burley wherever they could get it the cheapest—from larger and more capitalized operations. Small growers quit raising the crop in large numbers after 2004, and the next chapter examines why this was



so. Unfortunately, this brought Senator Cooper's (Kentucky) 1972 concerns regarding the state of small-scale tobacco farming, as quoted by Mann (1975), to fruition:

And I can just see that in time, gradually, as always happens in almost any economic field, those with greater means would grow and gradually take the acreages by sale or by lease from these small people. (p. 71)

## CHAPTER 4: BETHEL: THE CONTEXT OF MOUNTAIN TOBACCO FARMING

*“A culture becomes available in a special way once it’s waning. We can see it more clearly then. It’s hard to know what’s happening at the time it’s going on. We don’t have the perspective that we do when we view it across time.”*

- Robert Morgan, 2002, p.496

### **Introduction**

The community of Bethel in western Watauga County, North Carolina, is the last tobacco growing community in the county. Commercial tobacco first arrived in Watauga County in the late 1920s, and with the advent of the tobacco program in 1938, burley tobacco became a reliable cash crop for farmers transitioning from subsistence-based economies to cash-based economies in the 1940s. For the latter half of the twentieth century, burley tobacco provided farmers and families with a partial, but stable, source of yearly income. Tobacco in the mountains never equaled the size and scope of tobacco farms off the mountain (Griffith, 2009). Yet, burley tobacco played an important role in the livelihoods of Watauga County farmers over the course of the twentieth century. As part of a diversified farm or work strategy, tobacco farming helped maintain family income, farming traditions, and ways of life even as modernization transformed agriculture and the structure of the American economy in the twentieth century. Bethel and other agrarian mountain communities were able to profit from raising tobacco because of the federal tobacco program. The previous chapter outlines the burley tobacco program and how it developed, worked, and ended.

The goal of this chapter is to give the previous chapter a face, namely, by examining Bethel. So, too, I hope to show Bethel’s current place in the global economy, and therefore, it

is important to trace its historic cultural and economic roots. The chapter begins with an examination of Rhoda Halperin's (1990) theoretical constructs of "multiple livelihood strategies" and the "deep rural" and how these models apply to Bethel. In the early twentieth century, Bethel was a subsistence-based agrarian community. Though some cash economy did exist, providing for the household economy remained the main goal of these subsistence-based families. This chapter next addresses James Scott's (1976) theory of the moral economy of subsistence cultures. I detail components of the moral economy that apply to Bethel, which include avoiding risk and reliance on community cooperation. These factors characterized the history of farming and the tobacco farming culture and economy of Bethel throughout the twentieth century. Examining Bethel's pre-modern economy through the lens of the moral economy also helps account for Bethel's transition to a modern economy in the 1930s and 1940s.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, the tobacco program provided stability for tobacco farmers in Bethel as modernity continued to emerge, enabling farm families in Bethel to combine elements of both tradition and progress in their daily lives (Hatch, 2008). When the program ended, however, so did the viability of tobacco farming in the mountains. Off the mountain, larger farms increased mechanization, hired more labor, took on more debt, and increased their production of tobacco. But in the mountains, with limited flat land and smaller operations, farmers could not scale up and compete with the price of deregulated tobacco. After 2004, most mountain tobacco farmers quit raising the crop, highlighting the crucial role the program played in mountain tobacco farming. Today, a few farmers in Bethel

still raise tobacco on contract with tobacco companies, continuing their cultural traditions. Tobacco brings less money now than it did years ago, but these farmers still carry on.

### **Multiple livelihood strategies**

According to Rhoda Halperin (1990), “multiple livelihood strategies refer to people performing many kinds of work tasks in a given day, week, season, and lifetime...they also perform many tasks for which they may or may not be paid” (p. 19). More complex than just occupational pluralism (i.e., working two jobs) multiple livelihood strategies indicate participation in various economic institutions and “consist broadly of subsistence strategies and cash-generating strategies” in agrarian, marketplace, and wage labor economies that span the urban to rural (Halperin, 1990, p. 20).

The concept of multiple livelihoods allows us to see from the ground level how families and neighbors in Bethel have worked to maintain their cultural identity throughout the modernization trends of the twentieth century. Multiple livelihood work has evolved generationally in Bethel: from subsistence-based economies with little cash, to cash-based farming and marketplace/wage labor economies with some subsistence, to marketplace jobs with little subsistence. Despite these changes during the twentieth century, Bethel has retained its rural identity.

### **Constructing the “deep rural”**

To understand the livelihood patterns in Bethel, it is beneficial to use the conceptualizations Halperin (1990) applies to an Appalachian, rural-working class region of Kentucky: the “deep rural,” the “shallow rural,” and the “urban.” These zones demarcate geography, livelihood opportunities, and livelihood patterns. Typically, ethnographic

research has focused on the mostly rural or the mostly urban, leaving the middle ground between them, the “shallow rural,” undervalued (Halperin, 1990). The shallow rural is “an unstudied, unnamed, and uncategorized gray area between country and city that contains the most intricate mix of possible livelihood strategies” (Halperin, 1990, p. 17). The shallow rural is geographically situated in the “country” but is infused with modern conveniences, such as shopping centers and factory jobs, that, on the one hand, provide its inhabitants easy entry into the marketplace economy, but on the other hand, endanger its rural characteristics and economy. Its inhabitants work in the marketplace but also have gardens and small farms; they frequently fluctuate between zones and tend to identify with the “country.” Unlike the “urban” economy, with its own opportunities for livelihoods, the shallow rural is not far removed from its roots in the deep rural (Halperin, 1990).

Halperin (1990) uses the term deep rural to conceptualize the region we think of as “the country.” In the country, different livelihood opportunities exist than for those living in an urban or a shallow rural area, because the deep rural is geographically, ecologically, and culturally distinct. The deep rural is often devoid of major industry and interstates, but as modernization reaches out across the country, once-deep rural places can quickly become shallow rural areas. Major highway expansions, for example, lead to an infrastructure that supports large transportation, industrial parks, and chain stores, transforming the deep rural to the shallow rural. Still, these distinctions are fluid as people fluctuate between these constructed zones.

Geographically, the deep rural is distant from cities and largely thought of as “home” for both urban and shallow rural Appalachians (Halperin, 1990). Its population is sparse

(compared to the urban and shallow rural), big infrastructure is minimal, and fast food, banks, and grocery stores are infrequent. Ecologically, the deep rural offers its inhabitants natural resources with which to make livelihoods. In Bethel this includes timber for logging, hillsides for grazing or raising Christmas trees, bottomland for growing tobacco, corn, or hay, and land for leasing, among other things. Taking both of these designations together, Beaver (1986) states that, historically, “mountain communities were defined by the terrain; property lines generally followed the ridge lines. These ownership and settlement patterns reinforced community identity within hollows and coves and led to a sense of distinctiveness of the various hollow communities” (p. 18).

Culturally, the deep rural is built on the traditional settlement pattern of family land inheritance, and family ownership of the land “confers independence as well as a sense of place” (Beaver, 1986, p. 18). So, on the one hand, land ownership is crucial to the deep rural economy, because it provides people with control over resources, thus allowing for multiple ways to make a living off the land. But, on the other hand, “a farming community has organic coherence because its residents have strong ties to the land that defines the place” (Salamon, 2003, p. 182). Land allows multiple generations of family to live nearby and helps support strong social networks and connections (Keefe, 2009; Salamon, 2003). Moreover, inherited land often is sold between siblings, allowing for family land to stay in the family and remain productive, giving family members the option to leave the deep rural in pursuit of other interests while keeping the connection to “home” alive (Beaver, 1986). Those staying in the community maintain a cultural continuity, keeping up long standing social connections and

livelihood strategies that have developed over time in deep rural economies. In Bethel, one of those long-standing cultural traditions is farming tobacco.

### **Bethel: a deep rural economy**

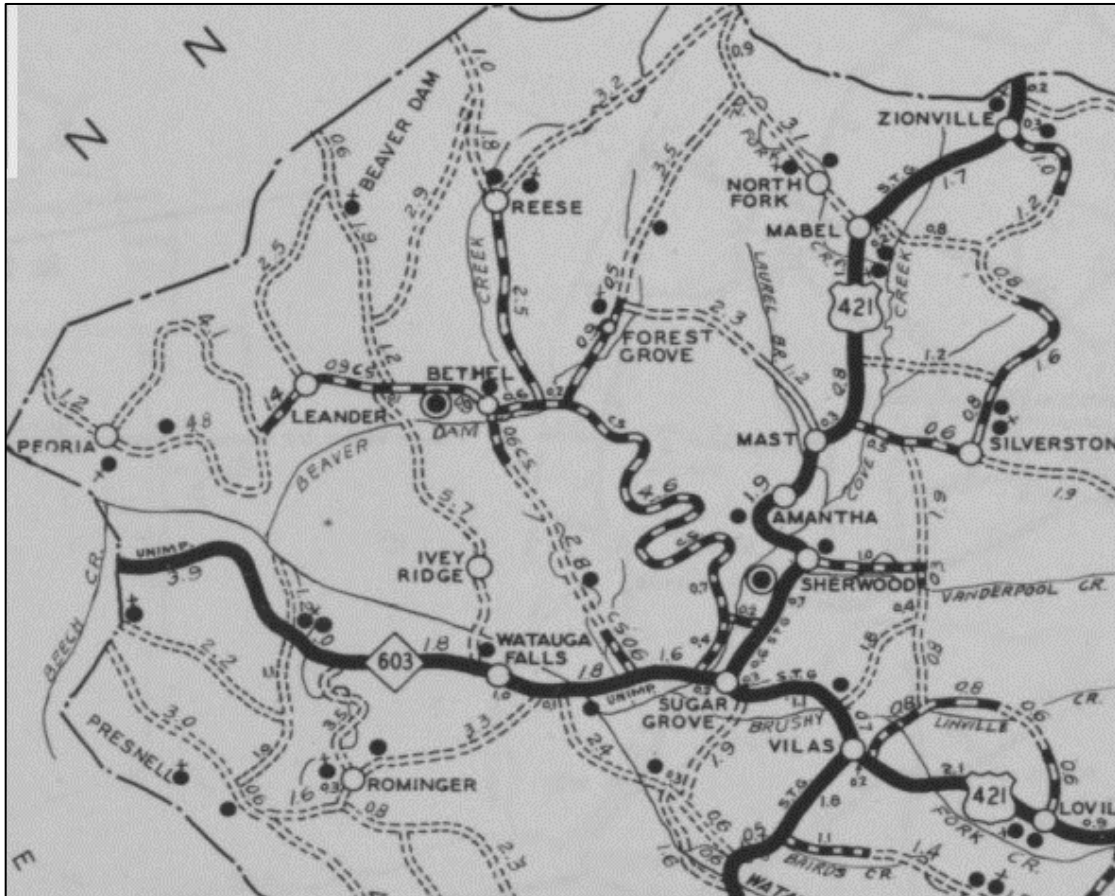
Bethel is located in the western part of Watauga County near the Tennessee/North Carolina line, about a thirty-minute drive from the two closest towns, Boone, North Carolina, and Mountain City, Tennessee. It is a small, cove-like area surrounded by mountains on all sides. Beaver Dam Creek runs through the community to the Watauga River, which flows into Tennessee. Historically, no railroad ran through the community, and no major highway was easily accessible. Prior to the 1960s, the best road in to and out of Bethel was George's Gap Road, a winding two-lane road that eventually leads to what is now U.S. 321. In 1936, George's Gap Road was a gravel road and the only improved road in the community (*North Carolina County Road*, 1936). In Map 4.1 the serpentine-like dashed line (connoting a graveled road) represents George's Gap Road (Bethel is located at the center of these maps). A more accurate and detailed George's Gap Road is depicted in Map 4.2: the bold outlined roads in this map are the rural delivery routes run by the Post Office, circa the 1920s (*Rural delivery routes*, 1920). By 1953, George's Gap Road was paved and several other tertiary roads were stoned surfaced (*Watauga County*, 1953). By the early 1960s, U.S. 321 had been rerouted on what was formerly state highway 603 and extended into Tennessee (*North Carolina County Road*, 1936; *Highway maintenance map*, 1962). In the mid-1960s, as part of a federal secondary highway systems aid program, a new road was constructed from U.S. 321 to Bethel (*Watauga County, North Carolina*, 1968). This road is now known as Bethel Road, and it replaced George's Gap Road as the easiest way to drive in and out of Bethel. In

symbol and in practice, the new Bethel Road better connected Bethel to the infrastructure of the rest of Watauga County, and it precipitated the consolidation of the county's high schools. Bethel High School, along with the four other Watauga County high schools, closed in the spring of 1965, and in the fall of 1965, a newly consolidated Watauga County High School opened (Corbitt, 1976).

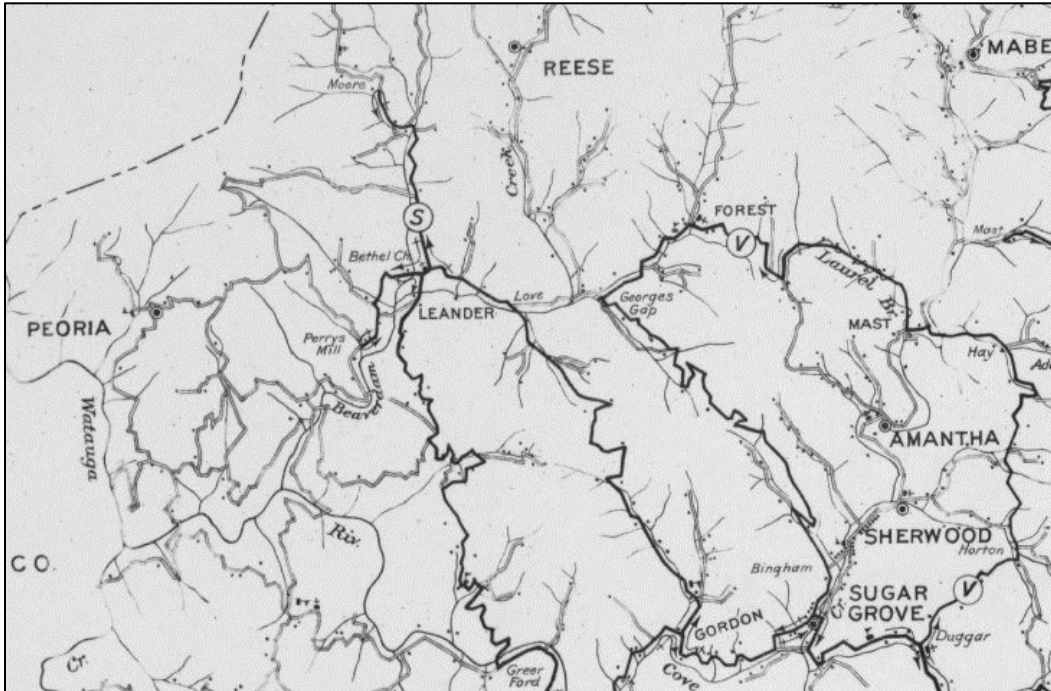
As modernization has taken hold in America throughout the twentieth century, many places that would have been identifiable as deep rural prior to World War II have merged with urban areas. Farming communities that once existed around nearby towns and cities are no longer even shallow rural areas but just larger parts of the metropolitan infrastructure (Lee, 2005). But despite increasing modernization and integration into the market economy across the nation, Bethel has remained a deep rural area. Better roads have made it easier to get to nearby towns and jobs, but even in the modern economy, these places are still some distance away.



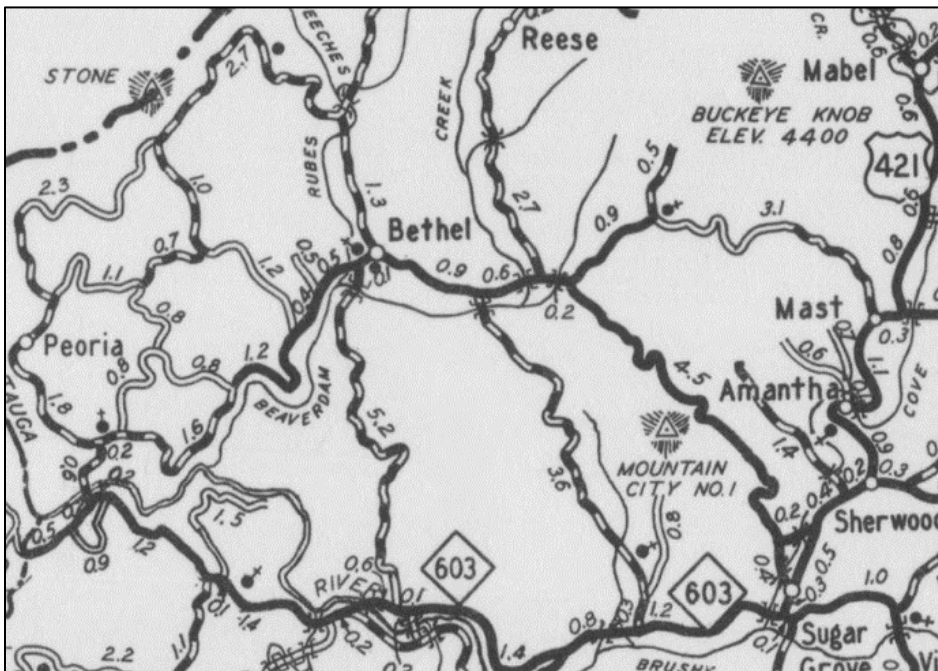
Map 4. 1. North Carolina county road survey of Watauga County, 1936 (North Carolina Maps, State Library of North Carolina). Retrieved from: <http://www.lib.unc.edu/dc/nmaps/?CISOROOT=/nmaps>



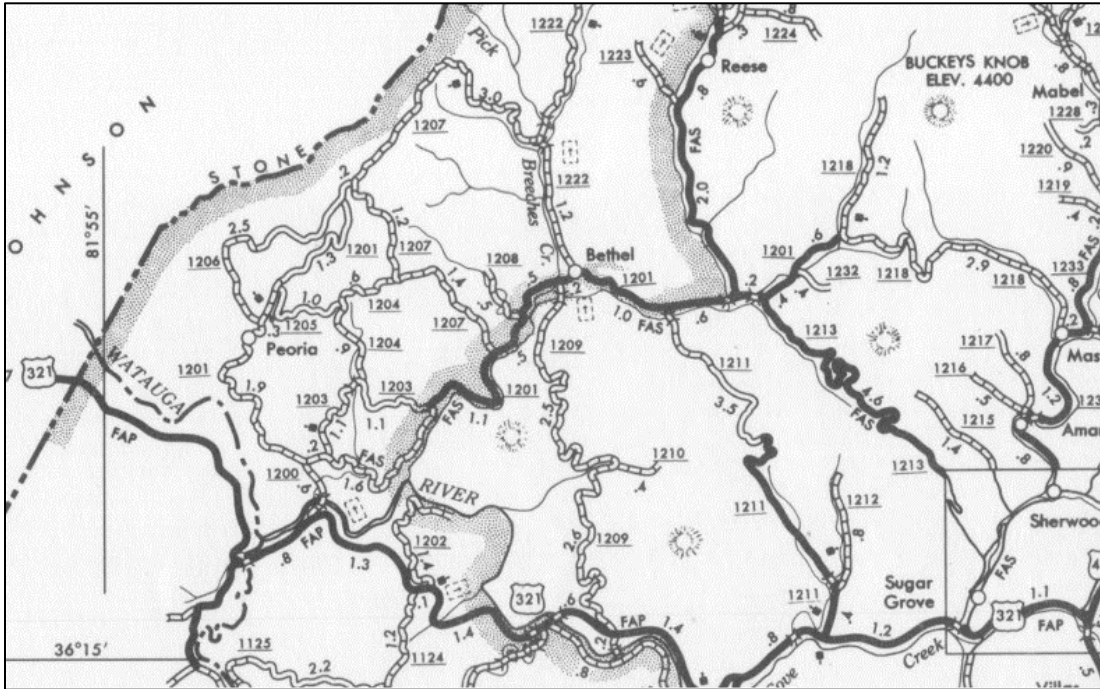
Map 4. 1. Rural delivery routes, United States Post Office, circa 1920s)



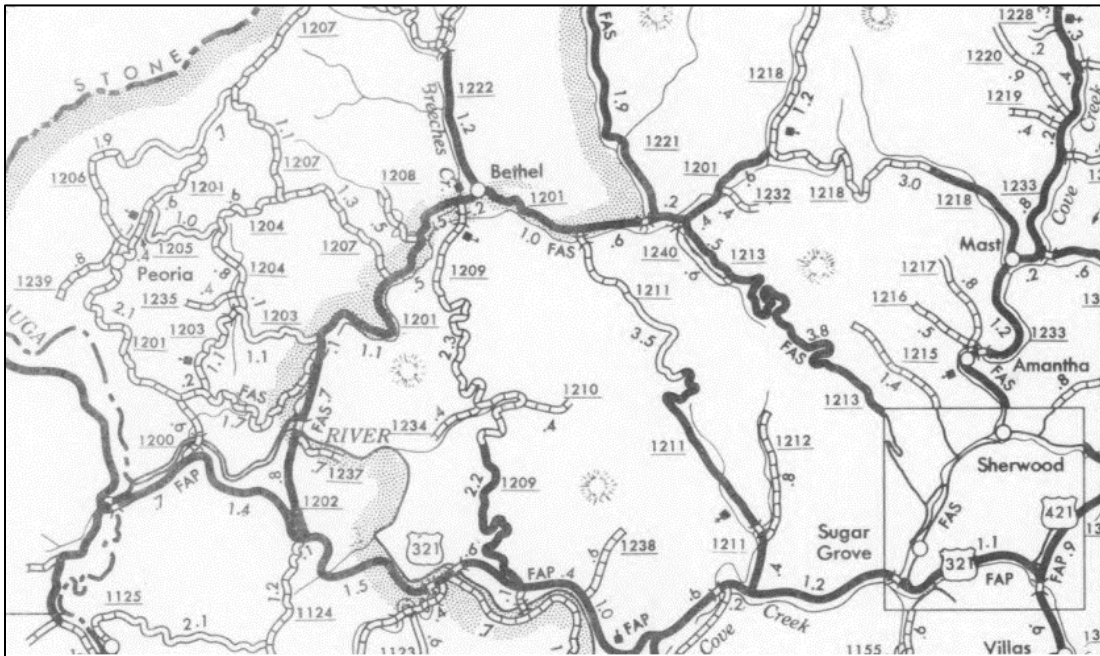
Map 4. 2. Watauga County (state highway and public works commission), 1953



Map 4. 3: [highway maintenance map of] Watauga County, NC, 1962



Map 4. 4: Watauga County, North Carolina (highway maintenance map), 1968



In Bethel, the social, land, and community ties that existed prior to modernization are still active, and so are its farming traditions. Of all the communities in Watauga County, a county that at times had hundreds of tobacco quota holders, Bethel is the only place where tobacco is still being grown, albeit by just a handful of farmers. Even in the midst of a free market tobacco industry, these farmers are continuing a community tradition that has been lost elsewhere in the county and region. To understand why this is so, it is helpful to utilize Scott's (1976) theory of the moral economy and analyze how it reinforces the tobacco culture in Bethel.

### **The moral economy in Bethel**

Burley tobacco farming communities throughout the twentieth century have relied upon cooperation and mutual assistance for the success of their crops (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). Neighbors have helped neighbors in times of need and when cutting or hanging tobacco needed to be done; extended family, too, helped in these times. As working tobacco began to compete with off farm work in the mid to late twentieth century, exchanged labor began evolving to cash exchanges between family, neighbors, and friends (Kingsolver, 2011). This development illustrates a measured decline in the "moral economy" of burley communities over the course of the twentieth century. But, what is the moral economy? Concerning subsistence-based communities, Scott (1976) writes that the moral economy "is the central economic dilemma of most peasant households...the peasant household has little scope for the profit maximization calculus of traditional neoclassical economics" (p. 4). As I outline below, the twentieth century farming traditions of Bethel developed out of a subsistence-based culture characteristic of the peasant societies in Scott's (1976) study.

Bethel's historical "subsistence ethic, then, is rooted in the economic practices and social exchanges of peasant society" (Scott, 1976, p. 6). These practices and exchanges, which constitute the moral economy, "provide a minimal subsistence insurance for villagers" (Scott, 1976, p. 5). As Keefe (2009) writes: "In these kinds of economies, people are bound together by social obligation and reciprocal exchange" (p. 17).

In the pre-modern subsistence economies of these communities, community cooperation provided a sort of insurance for subsistence families, creating a type of economy that might cause some to lose status while allowing for everyone to make a living out of the community resources (Scott, 1976). Arthur (1915) highlights this ethic in Bethel (known then, generally, as the Beaverdams, or Beaverdam, community) through his brief biography of Dudley Farthing (1804-1895), a prominent county citizen of his era and one of the largest landholders in the community:

It is said that when corn was scarce he [Dudley Farthing] would not sell it for money, saying a man with money could get it [corn] anywhere, but a man who had no money could get it only where he was known and his needs obvious. He [Mr. Farthing] lost little if anything by thus crediting his neighbors in distress. (p. 309)

This example of placing the community before personal profit reinforces Scott's (1976) theory of subsistence-based moral economies and shows how the farming culture of Bethel was founded on this system. The moral economy contrasts with the goals of capitalist/market economies based on individual profits; in fact, it has "little scope" for such enterprises (Scott, 1976). It is within this framework of the moral economy, then, that we can examine the tobacco farming culture of Bethel throughout the twentieth century.

Studying the moral economy means emphasizing local values and experiences within research (Keefe, 2009; Scott, 1976). This economy is kin-based and founded upon reciprocal exchange and intimate social bonds, and these factors create the community's social capital, which are the resources and connections within a community by which a community can pursue common goals (Keefe, 2009). In a rural setting like Bethel, aspects of the moral economy still drive interactions and organization. For example, one farmer in Bethel helps put out the hay for another older farmer's cattle, providing the older farmer the ability to still keep cattle well into his eighties. As another example, when one farmer's son was in the hospital, neighbors and friends put his tobacco crop in the barn to ensure the success of his crop.

In a moral economy, this reciprocal type of social obligation is crucial to maintaining cultural and community identity, and not just in times of crisis (Halperin, 1990; Keefe, 2009). Halperin (1990) notes that among community members sharing a common identity and multiple livelihoods, egalitarianism can confer reciprocity. In this situation, tobacco work is a more cohesive part of daily household and community life, and is less demarcated than full time work off the farm. With numerous community members all working in the same industry, tobacco farming, and all expecting to receive comparable incomes from tobacco, exchanges of work and shared labor occurs. Working tobacco crops, talking about tobacco, and helping neighbors and family becomes a habitual community practice. This is how an egalitarian common identity can confer reciprocity and help to build and maintain social capital (Halperin, 1990; Keefe, 2009; Salamon, 2003). Scott (1976), then, makes the point that "village egalitarianism in this sense is conservative not radical; it claims that all should

have a place, a living, not that all should be equal” (p. 40). Thus, we find that the practitioner of multiple livelihoods, the “jack of all trades,” tends “to give freely and generously of their time and resources to help kin and neighbors on a regular basis” (Halperin, 1990, p. 15). Historically in Bethel, this claim is synonymous with the example of Dudley Farthing (mentioned above). Farthing would rather provide for his community’s well-being out of his surplus crops than make extra money at their expense. As Bethel has transitioned to the modern economy, this ethic has changed over time. Today, some farmers and friends still help each other out, such as Bill Sherwood, who puts out hay for C.B. Reese’s cattle. On a larger, community wide scale, however, this ethic of cooperation has changed in Bethel since the mid- to late-twentieth century. According to one former tobacco farmer, people in Bethel do not help each other out and work/labor together today as much as they once did. This claim points to the loss of the shared common identity and multiple livelihoods that at one time characterized Bethel’s tobacco culture and economy. With less common work in tobacco farming, there is less opportunity for acting out the egalitarianism that confers reciprocity, and this highlights Bethel’s transition from a moral economy to a modern economy.

At the same time, the loss of the moral economy is also changing the community power structure and social standards (Scott, 1976). Dudley Farthing, in the late nineteenth century, provided for others in the community when they were in need. In terms of the moral economy, the elevation of Farthing’s status (as a community patriarch) is less relevant to my argument than seeing the integration of his actions in the larger scope of general community health. In the end, the community possessed a moral solidarity based on its ability to

safeguard and feed its members (Scott, 1976). This concern for the community played out through the twentieth century in Bethel and continues to change with the loss of tobacco farming and the onset of free market economic forces. When tobacco farming was viable in Bethel, farmers bought fertilizer and supplies at local-area businesses (personal communication, Tommy Lawrence, 2011). Buying supplies locally conferred a degree of loyalty to the community (personal communication, Shelby Eggers, 2011). In the moral economy of Bethel in the late twentieth century, buying supplies locally dovetailed with shared work in tobacco farming. They both mutually supported each other. When tobacco farming declined, however, what was left of the pre-modern moral economy declined as well, as more characteristics of neoliberal economics took hold. For example, a farmer that used to buy inputs locally now drives farther to get a cheaper price for fertilizer. His concern is that the local stores are not concerned about him (meaning not concerned about the financial hardships of the local farmers). His solution is to buy his inputs where he can get the cheapest price. In effect, the ideals of competition and individual profit that characterize neoliberal economics have replaced the moral economy's ethics of cooperation and community well-being that once characterized Bethel. Rather quickly, an economy that was founded for decades upon cooperation, help, neighborliness, etc., and made viable by the stability of the tobacco program, transitioned to a full free market economy.

For much of the twentieth century, the culture of tobacco farming provided Bethel and other Watauga County communities the opportunity to act out the moral economy in an increasingly modern economic landscape. Kinship and neighbor connections were highly valued and needed to raise tobacco. Children were taught work ethic, responsibility, and



farming traditions by helping raise tobacco and by raising their own crops. One of my classmates, who is from the Valle Crucis community in western Watauga County, grew up raising tobacco. During his middle and high school years, he and his sister worked their own tobacco patch. Their grandfather provided the inputs (sprays, fertilizer, etc.), and they did all the work and cultivating. They all three split the profits in thirds, and my classmate used that tobacco money to buy his first truck. After the buyout, they quit raising the crop. This example shows that, in spite of increasing modernization and off-farm work in the 1990s and 2000s, the tobacco program allowed small and part-time farmers to continue their cultural tradition of raising tobacco, keeping aspects of the moral economy alive in Watauga County and Bethel. Further examining Bethel's roots in subsistence-based farming is necessary to better frame the importance of the tobacco program's role in maintaining an agrarian culture in Bethel throughout the twentieth century.

### **Subsistence-based economies**

The pre-1930s subsistence-based economy of Bethel functioned like that of some other traditional mountain communities, typically consisting of small, non-commercial family farms that consumed most of their own agricultural products (Arthur, 1915; Beaver, 1986; Halperin, 1990; Hatch, 2008; U.S. Census, 1930). During this era, cattle production thrived in Watauga County, and farmers cleared hillsides for pasture and planted corn for feed and household use. During this time, forested hillsides were often clear-cut for pastures. With more livestock to feed, more corn was planted in both bottomlands and hillsides, contributing to the depletion of the county's topsoil by the mid twentieth century (van

Noppen & van Noppen, 1973). Despite these issues, cattle production provided families with meat, dairy, and some income, crucial elements to their subsistence-based livelihoods.

In the nineteenth century, cattle, as well as other livestock, were sometimes sold to drovers moving through the area. Prior to the Civil War, hogs were frequently driven through the Watauga County communities (Arthur, 1915). In the twentieth century, cattle continued to provide some income for farmers in Bethel, and they were sold to drovers or taken to Tennessee for sell at a nearby railroad (personal communication, Shelby Eggers, 2012). The livestock that was not sold was kept for home consumption. Cattle were grazed in newly timbered pastures and hogs were kept through the winter, feeding on mast in the forests. Meat was butchered and cured on the farm and hung to dry in smokehouses (Arthur, 1915).

The data in Figure 4.1, from the 1930 U.S. Census, highlights a few of the important cash generating strategies for farm families in Watauga County, and Watauga's neighboring counties, in 1930. The most unique example concerns sheep production. Sheep served a dual purpose for farm families. They provided wool for clothing and meat for food, and in the early decades of the twentieth century, Watauga County had a strong market for selling sheep (Jarrell, 2011; U.S. Census, 1930; van Noppen & van Noppen, 1973). Figure 4.1 shows that in 1930 Watauga County reported having 16,670 sheep on 642 farms (U.S. Census, 1930). Including Watauga's neighboring counties, Ashe, Avery, and Allegheny, the area that would come to be known later in the twentieth century as the "high country" accounted for, in 1930, approximately forty percent of North Carolina's sheep production (U.S. Census, 1930). In comparison, Figure 4.1 shows that neighboring Wilkes County (off the mountain and to the east of Watauga County) produced only 994 sheep on 52 farms, and Yancey County, a

mountain county to the southwest of Watauga County, produced just over 4,000 sheep, four times less than Watauga. This market for sheep was one of the few viable cash generating farming strategies in Watauga County during the years around 1930 (U.S. Census, 1930)

Figure 4.1. Watauga County cattle, dairy, and sheep production statistics, 1930 (U.S. Census, 1930)

		Alleghany	Ashe	Avery	Watauga	Wilkes	Yancey
Sheep production							
1	Sheep on farms	15,055	28,712	8,099	16,670	994	4,032
	Farms reporting	573	1,031	210	642	52	207
Cattle production							
2	Cattle on farms	9,827	20,021	5,497	10,765	12,752	6,027
	Farms reporting	1,805	3,281	1,242	2,095	4,318	1,818
Dairy production							
3	Cows and heifers milked	3,395	7,059	2,021	4,099	7,309	2,850
	Farms reporting	1,291	3,209	1,191	2,056	4,258	1,824
4	Milk produced, gallons	1,097,010	3,035,083	1,018,530	1,812,823	3,082,202	1,350,461
5	Whole milk sold, gallons	27,089	1,001,211	31,319	128,594	107,723	9,244
	Farms reporting	61	564	131	157	199	24
6	Butter sold, farms reporting	659	1,828	357	937	1,929	383

The select statistics in Figure 4.1 with regards to dairy production indicate a few major points about the nature of farming in the Watauga County at this time. Dairy was an important element of Watauga County farming but not as unique as sheep production in comparison to neighboring counties. Producing close to two million gallons of milk, Watauga County falls into the average range of mountain and Piedmont county milk production in 1930. Of the approximately 1.8 million gallons of milk produced in Watauga County by just over 2,000 farms, only 128,594 gallons was sold as whole milk, and that by only 157 farms (U.S. Census, 1930).

Watauga's experience contrasts with Ashe County, Watauga's immediate neighbor to the northeast, which produced approximately 3 million gallons of milk and sold one million gallons, from 564 farms, as whole milk. Concomitantly, twice as many farms sold butter in Ashe County than did in Watauga County, indicating a substantially stronger market for dairy in Ashe. The number of farms producing milk in Watauga County in 1930, some 2,056, but not selling it as either whole milk (approximately 1,900 farms) or butter (approximately 1,100 farms), suggests a few possibilities regarding livelihoods. Home consumption of dairy products was widespread. According to Figure 4.1, around 4,000 cows and heifers were milked on 2,000 farms, equaling about two dairy cows per farm with a rough average. With most farms probably having one or two dairy cows, it seems reasonable to conclude that the amount of milk produced met the needs of the Watauga County farm family with some surplus (U.S. Census, 1930). That surplus, for example, could be made into butter and sold, which about half of the reporting dairy farmers did in 1930, or, if not sold, then bartered at local general stores. This combination of selling or bartering surplus dairy products points

toward the commercial side of subsistence and applies to Bethel's economy in the 1930s (Hatch, 2003; personal communication, Braxton Johnson, 2012).

The small industries that existed in Bethel and in nearby communities provided subsistence-based farmers some opportunities to sell excess products. The mountain villages that spanned the roads near Bethel typically had general stores and several had gristmills (Arthur, 1915). Arthur (1915) claims Sugar Grove had the first cheese factory in the South, established on June 5, 1915, and the Vilas community also had a cheese factory. According to one Bethel farmer, Braxton Johnson, whose grandfather recounted stories of this era to him, the cheese factories did provide some opportunity to sell excess dairy for farmers in Bethel (personal communication, 2012). But, by the same token, Mr. Johnson noted how bartering was critically more important and more common to Bethel's economy than selling surplus. In Bethel, bartering took place at the local general stores, and dairy, eggs, and additional surpluses could be traded for other necessities, such as flour, sugar, and coffee (ibid.). As another aspect of the barter economy, corn could be ground at local mills in exchange for a portion of the meal. Families in Bethel at this time combined traditional farming and gardening, the use of the forests (for food, lumber, and feeding livestock), bartering, and some cash exchanges to build a life based predominately on subsistence agriculture (personal communication, Braxton Johnson, 2012; Beaver, 1986; Halperin, 1990; Hatch, 2003).

Bethel's subsistence-based economy, when considering the overall farming economy of Watauga County, presumably consisted of farms that were less-commercial in nature (U.S. Census, 1930). Until the advent of better roads and railroads in the region, the goods of

mountain farms (produce, livestock, fruits, etc.) were difficult to transport to markets (Beaver, 1986). As a result, commercial agricultural production remained small in Watauga County prior to the 1930s. There were, however, a few exceptions. As mentioned above, livestock was sometimes sold to drovers or locals themselves would drive livestock or sell it locally. Sheep production was strong in Watauga County and dairy products provided some income for farmers, as well (Jarrell, 2011; Beaver, 1986). Also, according to the 1930 U.S. Census of Agriculture, cabbage and green beans (snap or string) were the only significant cash crops in Watauga County in 1929. Cross-examining this data (Figure 4.2) with cattle statistics (Figure 4.1) confirms that commercialized farming in the county was not ubiquitous.

Figure 4.2. Cabbage and beans statistics for Watauga County, 1930 (U.S. Census, 1930)

		Cabbage: State Statistics	Cabbage: Watauga County
1	Acres	3,467	595
2	Value of crop (dollars)	400,933	91,816
3	Farms reporting	7,014	751
4	1919 acres	1,181	103
		Beans: State Statistics	Beans: Watauga County
5	Acres	9,796	100
6	Value of crop (dollars)	787,917	9,139
7	Farms reporting	10,795	172
8	1919 acres	1,500	4

In 1929, Watauga County had a thriving market for cabbage, having 751 farms that produced \$91,816 worth of cabbage on 595 acres (U.S. Census, 1930). The cash value of the county's cabbage crop, \$91,816, equaled nearly ¼ of the entire state's crop! Taking the number of cabbage farms (751) and the number of acres (595) together, it seems safe to

assume that most farmers produced around an acre or less of cabbage. A farm family could manage a crop of this size. Additionally, 172 farms reported having 100 acres of beans in 1929, producing a crop worth \$9,139. Commercial beans were likely grown on less than an acre per farm. Besides cabbage and beans, Watauga County did not produce significant amounts of any other field crop in 1930 (U.S. Census, 1930).

Figure 4.1 shows that 2,095 Watauga County farms reported having 10,765 cattle in 1929 for sale or consumption. Since examining the distribution of cattle to farms is beyond the scope of this research (but would be an important aspect of the agrarian economy to analyze), a simple average shows that five cattle per Watauga County farm was the possible norm in 1930. If 2,095 farms had cattle, presumably representing all the farms in the county, and only 751 of them raised cabbage, the only significant cash crop at the time, it seems safe to hypothesize that subsistence-based farming played a major role in the economy of Watauga County during this period. Cattle and sheep could be sold, and cabbage was sold by some as well, providing some income for farmers. But, this income was still a part of the overall diversified subsistence-based farming economy of the county (Hatch, 2003).

Burley tobacco did not become an important cash crop in Watauga County until the early 1930s, arriving comparatively later than in other sections of Appalachia (personal communication, C.B. Reese, 2011; Beaver, 1986; U.S. Census, 1930). In 1929, one mountain county near Asheville, North Carolina (Madison) produced over 2.2 million pounds of tobacco on 2,186 farms (U.S. Census, 1930). Madison County's tobacco infrastructure clearly was well established in the early twentieth century. It had been a major flue-cured, bright leaf tobacco producer in the state in the late nineteenth century (Algeo, 1997). After

that market waned, Madison County quickly reemerged in the 1920s as the burley production leader in the North Carolina mountains (Algeo, 1997; van Noppen & van Noppen, 1973). In Watauga County, however, burley tobacco was just beginning to emerge in the late 1920s. In 1929, fifty-four farms reported growing tobacco; they produced 15,382 pounds on twenty acres. In contrast, only eight acres were reported in 1924 and just four acres in 1919 (U.S. Census, 1930). Prior to the late 1920s, Watauga County had no tobacco economy whatsoever, and farms made little if any money from tobacco. Contrasted with Madison County, the lack of a tobacco economy further indicates the lack of cash-based farming in Watauga County until the 1930s. Even then, tobacco income did not become reliable until the 1940s with the permanent establishment of the federal tobacco program.

#### **“Risk” and the subsistence-based farming economy of Bethel**

Though burley tobacco stores well once it is cured, a lack of tobacco farming history, poor access to markets, and no government price supports/growing quotas made keeping and transporting tobacco from Watauga County to market a risky venture for farmers prior to the 1930s and 1940s. Scott (1976) theorizes that subsistence economies are risk averse, and that risk is “the central economic dilemma for most peasant households...typically, the peasant cultivator seeks to avoid the failure that will ruin him rather than attempting a big, but risky, killing” (p. 4). Leaving the farm to drive cattle, investing heavily in one crop, or selling tobacco at market would constitute significant risk for subsistence-based families in distant farming communities, such as Bethel, during the early twentieth century. Therefore, a consistent subsistence becomes more profitable for the household economy than any single profit-generating venture, since subsistence is steady and reliable (Scott, 1976).



In the subsistence era of Bethel, avoiding risk meant valuing the diversification of work, and on a subscale, the diversification of farming. For work, Bethel subsistence farmers have logged timber, farmed, grazed livestock, and had some wage labor (U.S. Census, 1930). At times, these various jobs have crossed paths. As an example, in the early 1930s, a new school was built in Bethel by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the WPA bought and built with timber cut by locals and hired locals to work on the project, as well (personal communication, Shelby Eggers, 2011). With regard to farming, minimizing risk included planting multiple seed varieties, raising gardens, tending orchards, planting on scattered pieces of land, and utilizing the commons (Beaver, 1986; Boyer, 2006; Scott, 1976). Diversifying helped to ensure multiple sources of food, and later income, which provided for the family's well-being. As these subsistence-based farmers transitioned into the modern economy in the 1940s and 1950s, growing burley tobacco, supported by the federal tobacco program, became a stable and safe way to make some money from farming in Watauga County. This security characterized tobacco farming in Bethel for much of the latter half of the twentieth century.

#### **Burley production in Watauga County: 1929—2007**

Beginning in the 1940s and continuing until the last years of the tobacco program, tobacco production in Watauga County remained relatively consistent as the number of farms grew and then declined (see Figure 4.3). In 1944, with tobacco in high demand due to World War II tobacco consumption and with a newly secured tobacco program voted-in by farmers, 987 farms reported raising tobacco on 788 acres in Watauga County. These 987 farms produced roughly 1.2 million pounds of tobacco (U.S. Census, 1950). Throughout the rest of

the program years, tobacco production in Watauga County remained relatively constant, hovering around 1.2 million pounds for the duration of the program (see Figure 4.3). Initially, from the 1940s until the late 1960s, the number of tobacco farms increased as acreage quotas for burley were cut back (see Chapter 3). In 1959, 1,351 tobacco farms produced approximately 1.5 million pounds of tobacco in Watauga County (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1959). Of these 1,351 tobacco farms, 1,261 had one acre or less. Just 88 tobacco farms were between one acre and 2.4 acres and only two farms raised more than 2.5 acres of tobacco (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1959). Clearly, Watauga County was dominated by very small tobacco operations during the first decades of the program.

After the lease-and-transfer of quota provision of 1971 and the switch to poundage quotas, fewer farms produced Watauga County's tobacco production totals (Mann, 1975). Since nearly all tobacco farms in the county were an acre to a half-acre by 1971, leasing quota enabled farmers in areas where the means of tobacco production were the greatest, such as Bethel, to raise more tobacco. So, by 1978 Watauga County produced over 1.6 million pounds of tobacco on 598 farms (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1978). And five years after that, the county produced 2.2 million pounds on 613 farms. These were the peak years of tobacco production in Watauga County. After changes to the program in the mid-1980s (see Chapter 3), the blue-mold outbreak in the early 1980s (Chapter 5), and because of many other complex factors, tobacco production began to decline in Watauga County. In 1987, only 1.16 million pounds of tobacco was produced on 439 farms—a sharp fall from 1982's totals (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1987).

Although production rose and maintained through the 1990s, at approximately 1.4 million pounds in 1992 and 1997, between 1997 and 2002 tobacco production and the number of farms declined again (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1992; U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2002). Through all of these changes to the tobacco economy, tobacco production remained relatively constant in Watauga County because the tobacco program provided small farmers a fair and competitive price for their crops. When the program ended in 2004, tobacco production in Watauga County almost immediately bottomed-out.

Figure 4.3 Historic Watauga County tobacco production totals (U.S. Census of Agriculture)

Year	Watauga County Tobacco Production (U.S. Census of Agriculture)		
	Farms	Acres	Quantity (pounds)
1929	54	20	15,382
1934	307	153	157,469
1939	731	383	475,574
1944	987	788	1,278,942
1949	1,071	703	1,050,413
1954	1,265	860	1,583,795
1959	1,351	726	1,545,335
1964	974	657	1,347,350
1969	777	529	1,238,455
1974	575	615	1,248,081
1978	598	809	1,671,467
1982	613	1,049	2,240,169
1987	439	648	1,161,028
1992	416	779	1,459,009
1997	285	762	1,422,908
2002	187	495	959,769
2007	11	24	44,000

### **Tobacco farming in Bethel, post-buyout**

Currently in Bethel, tobacco farming is a risky venture. Direct farmer-to-company contracts provide no long-term stability for farmers and no price assurances, among other uncertainties. These contracts, which have replaced the bidding process of the auction warehouse during the tobacco program era, keep tobacco farmers, in the words of several farmers from Bethel, “at the mercy of the buyer.” Even in places with more arable land where tobacco production has increased since the buyout, tobacco farmers *en masse* operate with great uncertainty year to year (Benson, 2012; Donaldson, 2011; Griffith, 2009; Stull, 2009). In this new system, the company contractually controls the variety of tobacco planted, the chemicals used on it, and its selling price (if the crop is deemed buyable by the company). The free market structure of growing tobacco post-buyout favors competition between farmers, and it requires more capital, more land, more labor, and greater efficiency. Bigger is better and the only way to survive. For small tobacco farmers, like those in Watauga County, these changes were too burdensome to overcome, and growing tobacco became economically impractical (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007).

The data in Figure 4.4 (pictured below), with North Carolina county tobacco statistics from before and after the tobacco program buyout, supports this point. These statistics are from the 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture, which provides 2007 and 2002 production totals. Since the buyout of the tobacco program occurred in 2004, these statistics show the quantitative effect of the buyout on tobacco production in North Carolina. Figure 4.4 is divided into four sections of tobacco production data: state totals, mountain county totals, Piedmont county totals, and eastern North Carolina county totals. The counties are listed by

their geographical arrangement (northeast to southwest or north to south). The mountain and Piedmont counties were selected because of their proximity to Watauga County, and the eastern counties were selected because of their historic and current tobacco culture and production rates (Benson, 2012).

Figure 4.4 Tobacco production totals, North Carolina selected counties, 2002 and 2007 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007)

Geographic Area	Tobacco (Pounds)					
	2007			2002		
	Farms	Acres	Quantity	Farms	Acres	Quantity
State totals	2,622	170,083	365,958,031	7,850	167,677	353,125,841
Mountain county totals						
Ashe	34	114	204,886	230	693	1,177,596
Watauga	11	24	44,000	187	495	959,769
Avery	4	15	26,400	37	91	176,804
Mitchell	19	63	100,653	108	410	530,604
Yancey	28	134	175,743	256	976	1,293,012
Madison	57	350	635,205	467	1,882	2,650,963
Piedmont/near-mountain county totals						
Alleghany	32	389	673,378	108	251	361,689
Wilkes	7	385	1,024,750	17	431	918,915
Surry	90	3,325	6,600,072	217	3,591	8,181,564
Yadkin	56	2,694	5,659,437	130	2,584	5,800,101
Eastern North Carolina county totals						
Wilson	56	7,788	19,176,170	133	6,281	14,571,390
Wayne	108	8,944	21,705,115	208	5,035	11,054,539
Sampson	117	10,863	21,492,518	243	5,421	11,609,922

Figure 4.4 shows the 2007 and 2002 total number of tobacco farms, total amount of tobacco acreage, and total quantity of tobacco produced (in pounds). To summarize the data,

after the 2004 buyout, North Carolina saw tobacco production increase, production acreage slightly increase, and the number of tobacco farms decrease. Each county section highlights three different responses to these production changes following the deregulation of the tobacco market in 2004.

In 2002, two years before the end of the program, 187 farms reported raising tobacco in Watauga County (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007). In 2007, just five years later and three years after the end of the program, only 11 farms reported raising tobacco. Of the 187 farmers that reported raising tobacco in 2002, 176 had quit by 2007 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007). Production in Watauga County also fell drastically. In 2002, the county produced nearly one million pounds of tobacco. Although these totals are slightly less than the county's historic production rates, which often hovered between 1.2 and 1.5 million pounds, the 2002 totals do indicate that tobacco production remained relatively constant in Watauga County throughout the years of the tobacco program. But after the program ended, Watauga County's production dropped precipitously—in 2007, the county produced only 44,000 pounds (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007).

The buyout effectively ended tobacco farming in Watauga County and, as Figure 4.4 shows, in the other mountain counties as well. Each mountain county from Ashe to regional tobacco leader Madison, lost scores of tobacco farmers and hundreds of thousands of pounds of tobacco production. The tobacco program, with its price supports and marketing quotas, allowed for small growers, such as those in the mountains, to get competitive prices on their crops and maintain stability long-term. Under the program, their risk was minimal—187 Watauga County tobacco operations could still grow tobacco in 2002 and get decent enough

prices to justify raising the crop. Without the regulation of the program, the price of U.S. grown tobacco dropped significantly, reaching levels that were more comparable to prices on the world market (Ray, 2004). Tennessee burley prices dropped \$.38 per pound from 2004's average of \$1.98/lb. to 2005's \$1.60/lb. ("Tennessee Tobacco," 2010). In comparison, \$1.60/lb. was the price of burley in the late 1980s, twenty years earlier (Ray, 2004). As tobacco prices dropped after the buyout, the costs of inputs, machinery, and labor continued to rise, and many mountain tobacco farmers simply quit raising the crop (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007).

During this period that tobacco farming declined so quickly in the mountains, the opposite effect occurred in the flue-cured producing region of eastern North Carolina (see Figure 4.4). Wilson County went from 133 tobacco farms in 2002 to only 56 farms in 2007, after the deregulation of the tobacco market. But, those 56 farms produced approximately 4.5 million *more* pounds of tobacco in 2007 than the 133 farms produced in 2002 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007).

Following this trend, Wayne and Sampson counties nearly *doubled* their tobacco production after the buyout. In the Piedmont region, although production rates remained relatively the same, fewer farms produced these comparable totals. Yadkin County, for instance, produced approximately the same amount of tobacco in 2007 as in 2002, but it did so with 74 fewer farms. The deregulation of United States tobacco farming has clearly increased overall production in North Carolina while shifting it to fewer and larger operations (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007).

In Bethel, with the diversification of work strategies, part-time tobacco farming kept people on the farm and helped maintain the cultural fabric of farming communities throughout the twentieth century. The next chapter examines this theme in more detail. The key here is the tobacco program. The program made burley tobacco grown in small allotments in the mountains price competitive with burley from larger operations. With the end of the program and the onset of the contracting system in 2004, nearly every tobacco farmer in Watauga County quit raising the crop. Currently only a handful of farmers still raise tobacco. While production has increased and become more concentrated elsewhere in the state, in the mountains the deregulation of the tobacco market has effectively ended tobacco farming. What made the program so important for growing tobacco in the mountains?

### **The emergence of a market economy: the tobacco program**

In Bethel, the emergence of tobacco as a cash crop via the program in 1938 enabled subsistence-based farming families to transition into the modern economy gradually, with a reliable source of yearly income. The partial income provided by growing tobacco also necessitated the emergence of multiple livelihood strategies within the emerging market economy (Halperin, 1990). Since tobacco could only provide a portion of the household income, raising cattle and/or logging helped provide a year-round income for deep rural families in the mountains, and this enabled them to continue to navigate the transition to a market economy. Again, the tobacco program helped keep farmers on their farms and allowed them to continue to own their land and keep it in production. In just twenty years, from 1929 to 1949, Watauga County added over 1,000 tobacco farms (U.S. Census, 1930;



U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1950). It stands to reason that many of the farms that reported owning cattle in 1929, but that did not sell cabbage (some 1,300 farms), transitioned away from subsistence-based farming during the development and early years of the tobacco program. The program offered stability and guaranteed income for farmers; with a stable tobacco crop, they could continue to farm by having diversified operations or by having part-time/off-farm work. The program enabled farmers in Bethel to keep their land and continue farming as modernization began to change the American landscape. These assurances changed the moral economy of Bethel by replacing its safeguards of traditional subsistence-based farming with the safeguards of partial guaranteed income from tobacco money.

Anthropologist Elvin Hatch (2008), who has conducted research in a neighboring western North Carolina county, highlights other reasons why a cash economy began to replace subsistence culture. For one thing, modernization did seem to offer people material advantages, like easier and more efficient work and more comfortable living (with electricity, for example). Secondly, and more importantly, Hatch (2008) identifies the wider social movement of modernization underway in the United States after World War II. By distinguishing progress from backwardness, the powers of politics, media, and technology began to frame a pattern of an American economy based on the accumulation of wealth, consumerism, and technological advances (Escobar, 1995). This is exemplified in Appalachia by the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in 1933, a state modernist initiative aimed at the development of progress in the southern United States (Davidson, 1948; Whisnant, 1980). In agriculture, the 1954 farm bill and subsequent U.S.

farm policy, which emphasized mechanization, increased farm debt, and moving farmers off the land, etc., illustrate this movement towards modernization (Berry, Jr., 1993a).

Hatch (2008) frames the local level decisions to modernize in terms of the goals and viewpoints regarding change held by local conservatives and progressives. Based largely on moral terms, local conservatives (or traditionalists) believed that the market economy devalued social and kinship relationships and disregarded the prestige of the moral economy by focusing on the accumulation of money and wealth. By accumulating money, conservatives foresaw the rise of greed and consumerism and the loss of social and community cooperation. The market economy meant the loss of the way of life they had been born into, the loss of what Scott (1976) calls the moral economy (Hatch, 2008).

The goals for progressives, however, highlighted progress and leaving behind the old way of doing things, and of course, this was highly influenced by media and political power structures. The progressive agenda carried a moral dimension as well: its main arguments centered on making people's lives better, easier, more beautiful, and more meaningful (Hatch, 2008). Technology could erase chores; new chemical sprays could eliminate hoeing tobacco and suckering, and electricity enabled improvements at home and in work. These innovations provided tangible results and many benefits for farming families. As an example, electricity enabled small dairy operations the ability to upgrade their operations, making them more efficient and safer. Many dairies were then able to sell Grade A dairy products, which brought more income than lower graded (Grade C) products, which didn't require refrigeration (Hatch, 2008). Conversely, this moral ideal led to the old way being characterized as backward. Such things as undecorated homes or homemade items, when

compared to store bought products, began to be devalued as the modern economy emerged across the country. Similarly, mechanization in farming began to replace handwork, draft animals, and the old way of doing things. But, with the stability of the tobacco program, tobacco farmers were able to transition to a modern economy, absorb these changes, and keep their farming culture relatively intact.

Hatch (2008) identifies a simpler sense of modernity that developed, one that embraced characteristics of both tradition and progress. This type of modernity generally valued technological advances, new homes, new cars, factory jobs, and so on, but did so with a modest tone. Flashiness and excess consumerism were not in favor, and this is true in Bethel as well. One of my informants worked several years off the farm and had the opportunity to advance in his company, but he decided instead to return to work in Bethel, run the general store, and raise tobacco and farm part-time. He chose a lifestyle that provided more meaning than a job with career advancements and golf trips. His story is told in more detail in the next chapter. The homes of my informants are modest, and generally so are most of the homes in the community. Most of my informants live on or near their family land. Much of the second-home development in Watauga County has concentrated in other areas of the county, and these two lifestyles do not seem to compete in Bethel as they do elsewhere. But, it should be noted that part-time farmers in Bethel certainly found wage labor work during the second-home boom in Watauga and Avery Counties during the late-twentieth century. Working construction, grading, operating machinery, hauling, and logging were aspects of many part-time farmers' overall income (personal communication, Shelby Eggers, 2012). Over time, then, mountain progressivism in Bethel developed steady traction,

providing yet another dimension to its twentieth century moral economy. Even though modernity has taken full hold and the moral economy is now waning, traditional elements remain strong.

### **Transitioning to a market economy: coal**

Coal mining communities are often put forth as the standard of modernization in Appalachia. Yet, the gradual transition to the global market economy in Bethel contrasts with the rapid transition that occurred in the coal mining communities of southern Appalachia at the beginning of the twentieth century (Eller, 1982). Prior to the extraction of coal, communities in these areas operated similarly to subsistence-based Appalachian communities, such as Bethel, further south. When the coal companies moved in, the economies of these communities changed quickly. With good quality coal in the ground, a non-union workforce, and cheap start-up costs, coal barons in the mountains wrested industry dominance and accumulated huge profits (Eller, 1982).

Although tobacco and coal developed differently, many of the new miners in the burgeoning southern Appalachian coal industry carried the same agrarian background as the people who would become tobacco farmers in Bethel, one of “a system of small, independent family farms, clustered together in diffuse open-country neighborhoods” (Eller, 1982, p. 194). In mining, company power, manifested in the formation of the company town and the company store, drastically altered former subsistence-based farming community structures to the point that the livelihoods of miners were near totally controlled by the coal companies (Eller, 1982).

What, then, made the emergence of the market economy in burley tobacco farming different from that of the coal mining industry? The difference rests with the price support and quota system of the tobacco program, which led to a stable tobacco economy in Appalachia that checked the power of the tobacco companies. This key difference altered corporate power and its effects on life at the ground level for tobacco farmers (Benson & Kirsch, 2010). Essentially, the tobacco program enabled regional cooperatives to provide an equitable income for their members, those holding growing quotas, while protecting them from the power of tobacco corporations. In this way, local concerns and agendas were able to scale up through cooperative channels to the regional and national levels, and this provided tobacco farmers with an equitable livelihood (Gaventa & McGee, 2010). Today, however, the tables have turned. Power is manifested in farming under company contract, whereby corporations obtain “high-value commodities at low ‘wage’ prices while controlling the essential aspects of the production process” (Fisher & Harnish, 1980, p.7). The farmers under contract fall into a cycle of overproduction and low returns and are in competition with one another. Under the federal tobacco program, farmers were able to collectively sell their crops at a pre-negotiated price, and the system operated, at least in theory, equitably. Conversely, how different would the coal mining industry look if it had operated under a similar system, where a miners’ cooperative negotiated the price of mined coal?

### **Stability in tobacco farming**

Unlike coal economies, the tobacco program allowed agrarian communities to navigate the waters of modernization largely on their own terms. For example, many farmers owned their own farms at the outset of the tobacco economy in Watauga County, and this

provided a measure of independence concerning their work and kept family lands in production (U.S. Census, 1930; Salamon, 2003). By owning land, the landowner used it to their benefit or profit. They raised gardens for household consumption, grew corn and cut hay for livestock feed, and grew tobacco beginning in the 1930s. Later in the twentieth century, landowners continued to profit from land by leasing their tobacco quotas (which were tied to the land) to farmers still raising tobacco (Algeo, 1997). In this way, active growers could raise more pounds of tobacco and quota owners could still profit. This leasing system encountered problems later in the twentieth century, and added to the pressures on the program, but the program continued to function beneficially to farmers (Algeo, 1997; Benson 2012). With a stable and secure market for growing burley tobacco, landowners in the mountains could raise tobacco or lease their quotas and make at least a portion of the income they needed to live in the modern economy.

Although burley tobacco has provided substantial portions of income for a few mountain farmers, the majority of mountain growers raised tobacco as part of a diversified farm operation or in combination with public (wage labor) work (Benson 2012; personal communication, Tommy Lawrence, 2011). This was the trend in Watauga County and in Bethel and is contrasted with off the mountain tobacco operations, which tended to supply larger percentages of family income (Benson, 2012; Griffith, 2009; Kingsolver, 2011; Stull, 2009). In 1969, Watauga County had 777 tobacco farms on 529 acres (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1969). These farms produced 1,238,455 pounds of tobacco. Of those 777 farms, 184 farms were classified as Class 1-5 farms (farms that sold over \$2,500). These 184 farms produced nearly half the county's tobacco pounds (538,253) on slightly less than half its

acres in production (237). By 1969, burley tobacco acreage allotments had been cut back for several years due to overproduction stemming from higher per acre yields and growing numbers of allotments were reaching the half-acre minimum (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1969). Consequently, in 1971, burley quotas switched from acreage allotments to poundage allotments (Mann, 1975; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998).

By the 1960s and 70s, tobacco, livestock, and logging, or, tobacco, livestock, and off-farm wage labor, were prominent combinations of livelihoods in Bethel, and tobacco money often played an important role for the family within these multiple livelihood strategies. While providing the total number of tobacco farms and number of tobacco acres, the 1969 Census of Agriculture does not provide the per farm average income for tobacco. So, for a rough estimate, if Watauga County's 1969 total pounds (1,238,455) is divided by its total tobacco farms (777), each farm produced approximately 1,594 pounds/acre ( $1,238,455\text{lbs.}/777 \text{ farms} = 1,594 \text{ lbs./acre}$ ) (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1969). Using pricing statistics from Tennessee (which shares more commonalities with western North Carolina burley farms), in 1970, burley tobacco brought on average, .728 dollars per pound ("Tennessee Tobacco," 2010). Multiplying this rate by the average pounds per acre equals \$1,160 ( $\$.728 \times 1,594 = 1,160$ ). As a ballpark figure, the average Watauga County tobacco farmer received around \$1,160 dollars for their tobacco (not deducting expenses) in 1969/70. This figure holds steady with Watauga County farm income data from 1969, which gives the per farm average value of all agricultural products sold as \$3,154 (see Figure 4.5). Of this average farm income, roughly two-thirds came from livestock and one-third from crops (U.S.

Census of Agriculture, 1969). It seems reasonable to assume that the average farm in Watauga County in 1969 received around a third of its farming income from tobacco.

Figure 4.5. Watauga County farm income and sales, 1969 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1969)

Market value of all agricultural products sold	Dollars	3,895,298
Average per farm	Dollars	3, 154
Crops including nursery products and hay	Farms	909
	Dollars	1,234,376
Forest Products	Farms	43
	Dollars	26,287
Livestock, poultry, and their products	Farms	687
	Dollars	2,634,635

Although only a portion of the farming income in Bethel, tobacco money was significant and reliable as it continued to provide for the family household. Coming every winter, tobacco money often went towards Christmas gifts, paying yearly expenses, and paying property taxes (personal communication, Tommy Lawrence, 2011). So, while only a partial portion of farming income, tobacco money provided for important cultural components, such as Christmas gifts, college tuitions, and weddings. Moreover, tobacco farming and tobacco income kept family farmland in use, and allowed farm families to continue to own their own land and maintain their ways of life.

Within the Appalachian region as a whole, however, the burley tobacco economy varied in size and scale depending upon the availability of tillable land. In the foothills of Tennessee or in Kentucky for example, larger tracts of tobacco could be grown simply due to the availability of more cropland (Donaldson, 2011; Kingsolver, 2011; Stull, 2009). Growing larger tobacco crops inherently requires more laborers than a single farming family can



provide. Kingsolver (2007) points to Kentucky tobacco production's historic reliance on low-wage and no-wage farmworkers (i.e., slaves, tenant farmers, migrant workers, and unpaid family members), arguing that these "others" have been strategically used by farmers to a) perpetuate the Jeffersonian ideal while b) maintaining a hierarchical class structure that favors the farmer and ensures his accumulation of wealth.

Kingsolver's (2007) study builds on the fact that tobacco production has always been fully integrated in the global economy while relying on farmworkers. For example, she provides insight into the invisible role played by African slaves in pre-industrial Kentucky agriculture, an obvious exploitation of labor and illustration of global economic forces, but one that is often glossed over in historical remembrance. After slavery, tenant farmers took their place in the tobacco economy, and now, migrant workers are filling the labor void. These trends have characterized larger tobacco operations in America and have resulted in distinct class hierarchies in these places (Benson 2012; Kingsolver 2011).

In Bethel, due to Watauga County's lack of a tobacco economy prior to the 1930s, and because of the security stemming from the program, farm families were able to work their own tobacco crops. As noted earlier in this chapter, in 1959, 1,261 of 1,351 total Watauga County tobacco farms raised less than an acre of tobacco. Parents and children were able to work these patches with their own labor (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1959). Despite the fact that tenant farming was quite prevalent in Watauga County in the 1930s, approximately 450 of the 2,100 farms in 1930 were tenant farms, tenant farming was not as critical to the emergence and stability of Watauga County's tobacco economy as it was elsewhere in the South (U.S. Census, 1930). Since tenant farming was well established prior

to tobacco's emergence, and since tobacco crops in Watauga County were small and could therefore be worked by families, it stands to reason that the stability provided by the tobacco program was primarily responsible for Watauga County's historic tobacco economy.

Still, a yearly tobacco crop on small farms necessitated the need for help on certain occasions, and so, especially as fewer farms produced Watauga County's tobacco throughout the twentieth century, extended family, neighbors, and hired workers helped work tobacco crops. Generally, certainly into the 1980s and 1990s, and until the buyout, in Watauga County, sons and sons-in-law and daughters and daughters-in-law, living locally, would help parents and relatives put up tobacco on evenings and weekends after they finished working their day jobs. This kept social and cultural connections to land and place active and shows how a mountain ethic of hard work, industriousness (i.e., do it yourself), and cultural humbleness, all elements of the traditional moral economy, developed in the midst of modernity (Hatch, 2008).

But, by the 1970s, even though this next generation could often help with tobacco crops, they were not coming back to the farm to live and work. They had jobs in Boone or Lenoir or in other cities or states. Farming on a small scale was becoming too risky and too hard; if they wanted to farm, the opportunities often were not feasible. Around the country, federal farm policies drove families out of farming—the U.S. lost nearly one million farms between 1959 and 1969 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1969, Vol. 2[2]). To help get tobacco put up, farmers often swapped work with friends and neighbors, and increasingly, as the cash economy became more prevalent, they hired additional help. In 1969, 504 Watauga County farms reported hiring farm labor, up from 421 in 1964 (though the data is unclear as to what

specific farm work this hired labor did; U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1969 Vol. 1[26]). In the 1980s and 90s, wider economic and social forces continued to put pressure on American agriculture and tobacco farming. By the 1990s, those still raising tobacco in Bethel and elsewhere in the mountains were turning to migrant labor as the family and neighbor connections that once helped with tobacco were no longer available to work. These former helpers and workers had other jobs, more comfortable lives, or could not spare the time to put up tobacco. As fewer locals worked tobacco, their skills declined as well, and once the local tobacco labor force was depleted, the people remaining often were not the best or most reliable workers. It was at these “pressing times in the production cycle” that Bethel farmers began turning to migrant, mostly Hispanic, farm workers to help work tobacco (Kingsolver, 2011, p. 37).

### **The end of mountain tobacco farming**

In 2004, the tobacco program ended and U.S. tobacco production transitioned entirely to the free market. Today, post-buyout, tobacco farmers (both large and small) are at the mercy of corporate power (Benson & Kirsch, 2010). As tobacco prices have dropped and input and labor costs have continued to rise, farmers in Bethel can hardly afford to pay migrant workers and make any profit. One heavily invested tobacco farmer in Bethel had to lay off his Hispanic workers after 2004, because he could not afford to pay them. He figures that he and his wife might make minimum wage doing all their tobacco work themselves. Without a regulated price and growing quota, small tobacco farmers cannot compete in the newly deregulated tobacco economy. Because of limited cropland in the mountains, larger tobacco operations never materialized, and now, post-buyout, the tobacco culture and

economy of Bethel is waning. Most mountain farmers quit after the buyout, and the statistics are worth repeating: Watauga County went from 187 tobacco farms producing nearly one million pounds of tobacco in 2002 to 11 farms producing just 44,000 pounds in 2007 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007).

Why are these few men in Bethel still growing tobacco? Tobacco money has typically not provided large portions of family income in the mountains, and there are other ways to make the small income that tobacco money brings. For one farmer, 2011 will be his last burley crop. He's seventy-two years old and has been raising tobacco for much of his life. Maybe he still raises it because it's what he has always done. He has the skills, the equipment, and the knowledge to raise tobacco. Maybe tobacco connects him to his family and to his past. Tobacco farming in Bethel has historically been a family operation, from its developing years in the 1930s to today. One family in Bethel still raises tobacco together. A father and son each have a contract and share a field where they grow their tobacco. These men were taught about life, responsibility, and hard work in tobacco fields as children. Part of the reason they still raise tobacco is to teach their grandchildren and children the same life lessons. Maybe, then, raising tobacco is symbolic of a farming culture in Bethel. These few farmers who still raise tobacco in Bethel are the last ones standing. They are carrying on their community's farming tradition in spite of the economic forces that work against them.

### **Conclusion**

It's been my goal in this chapter to show how the tobacco program extended, not just tobacco farming, but also a culture of farming in Bethel and in other agrarian mountain communities during the twentieth century. Especially in Bethel and Watauga County, where

no significant cash-based tobacco economy existed prior to the 1930s, the program enabled farmers to grow tobacco with the assurance of getting a competitive market price. They could raise one acre of tobacco and know there would be some money at the end of the year. This made growing tobacco worth the risk of time and effort in Bethel. Prior to the 1930s, commercial agriculture in Bethel and Watauga County was minimal. Besides the selling of livestock, timber products, dairy, and, for a few years in the 1930s and 1940s, cabbage, which provided some income for farming families, most agricultural products were consumed on the farm or bartered at general stores (Jarrell, 2011; U.S. Census, 1930). Tobacco provided a secure source of farming income on a yearly basis and helped transition these subsistence-based farms to the emerging modern economy in the 1940s and 1950s.

Since its inception, tobacco farming in Bethel, and in the mountains, has generally provided only a portion of the farming household's income, but over the years, it has been crucial for the maintenance of agrarian cultures and economies. Because of the limited availability of arable land in the mountains, tobacco operations have remained small, mostly encompassing a few acres. Compared to larger tobacco operations in the Piedmont and in eastern North Carolina, mountain counties produced relatively small production totals. But even though the mountain counties had small tobacco farms, these small farms were an integral component of a greater farming infrastructure in the region, characterized by diversified and part-time operations. In turn, tobacco farming played a supplementary, but vital, role in the perpetuation of farming cultures in the mountains throughout the twentieth century. One question to ask is what makes a county tobacco dependent (Billings et al, 2010)? Is it the amount of pounds produced, which obviously favors counties with larger

operations and more flat land? Or, as was argued at the state level in Kentucky in the late 1990s, is county tobacco dependence more accurately surmised as a combination of “the number of farms, the percentage of per capita income represented by tobacco, and the amount of tobacco grown” (Billings et al, p. 16)? This latter definition, in the spirit of the tobacco program, leveled the playing field, and promoted a more inclusive definition of tobacco dependence, one that could have included Bethel and other mountain communities. Again, part-time tobacco farming enabled the continuation of farming as a way of life, and sometimes as a primary livelihood, in the mountains. But, all of this, this farming culture that existed in the mountains throughout the twentieth century, is predicated upon the tobacco program. The price supports and marketing quotas of the program allowed for mountain tobacco farmers to get competitive prices on their small crops. Without the program, as evidenced by the drastic decline in the number of tobacco farms from 2002 to 2007 in the mountains, tobacco farming in Bethel is seriously imperiled (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007). And thus, so is the culture and economy of farming in the mountains.

During the twentieth century, a stable market for tobacco ensured the continuation of farming in the mountains, even if it was only part-time. Tobacco farming made up small portions of incomes but large portions of ways of life. Moreover, the nature of raising a tobacco crop necessitated the need for help, which was often found in families and neighbors. As farmers transitioned to the cash economy in the 1930s and 40s, they were able to adapt aspects of their pre-modern subsistence-based farming culture to the emerging era of modernization. The tobacco program, then, helped former subsistence-based farms balance the changes brought by the emerging modern economy: they could still employ the social

connections and diversified farming techniques characteristic of the decades prior to the 1930s while entering into the modern, progressive world that surfaced during the 1950s. As modernity rapidly changed the American economic landscape post-1950, tobacco farming provided rural mountain families the ability to navigate those waters at their own pace. Families—mothers, fathers, and children—often worked their own tobacco. Neighbors and other family members helped each other at the most labor-intensive times of the year. Eventually, this work pattern, held over from the subsistence-based farming years, gave way to paying friends, family, neighbors, and workers in the 1970s and 1980s. Then, in the 1990s, migrant labor began to replace help from the local community (Algeo, 1997).

In comparison to the general trend of American farming, Bethel, and other tobacco-farming communities in the mountains, withstood the full emergence of the modern economy until the last decades of the twentieth century. The reason this is notable, and the reason I've framed this change with a somewhat negative connotation, concerns Bethel's social and cultural connections, its social capital, that has been disrupted with the modern economy's full emergence. One former tobacco farmer in Bethel lamented that people don't help each other out like they once did. In part, I find this sentiment results from the lack of a common identity and shared livelihood that once characterized Bethel (Halperin, 1990; Salamon, 2003). Without a tobacco economy and culture, fewer people are employed in the same line of work (tobacco farming, and diversified farming in general), fewer people work locally in the community, and the ethic of reciprocity that formerly characterized tobacco farming in Bethel, and was necessary for its success and the community's well-being, is waning. Without tobacco, Bethel has in some ways lost its tie that binds. Its social capital is not gone,

but it has changed significantly. It is now time to hear this story, the story of tobacco farming in Bethel, from the farmers who grew the crop.



## CHAPTER 5: THE STORY OF TOBACCO FARMING IN BETHEL: CULTURAL MEANINGS AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

### **Introduction**

During my research in Bethel, interviews with tobacco farmers usually began with a description of the tobacco growing process and the work involved in tobacco production. These farmers would talk me through each stage of the tobacco growing season and this would lead to my questions and their answers and stories about how tobacco was raised in the old days and how tobacco is grown and sold now. This chapter, then, tells the story of Bethel's tobacco culture and economy as it was told to me. Following the growing process over the course of a year, the chapter moves from season to season and era to era, culminating in the story of how tobacco is raised and sold in the current deregulated era of tobacco farming.

The chapter opens with a glimpse into the nascent years of tobacco farming in Bethel with descriptions of how farmers grew tobacco in the 1930s and 1940s, prior to chemical sprays, modern machinery, and other labor saving techniques. The next section concerns how tobacco was grown in the mid- to late-twentieth century and illustrates how some aspects of the "old days" work remained alive in Bethel even as tobacco farmers increasingly transitioned to more modern practices. By the 1990s, a set of complex factors began to change the tobacco economy. The cost of inputs increased, burley prices dropped, and the program turned less and less resilient. After the buyout of the program in 2004, small farmers were hit hard by the resulting changes to the tobacco economy. In these latter sections

regarding this new state of tobacco production post-2004, farmers from Bethel describe the differences between growing and selling tobacco during the program years and then after the buyout. Out of these discussions, the story of Bethel's tobacco culture and economy emerges.

Now, with direct company-to-farmer growing contracts and no tobacco program, tobacco farming in Bethel and in the mountains is nearly gone, and only a handful of people still raise any tobacco at all. The reasons most farmers have quit, namely, that they cannot make money growing the crop and that contracts are unavailable, speaks to the current state of tobacco farming in Bethel and in the mountains, indicating, too, that farming in general may not be a viable source of income going forward. Viewing Bethel's tobacco economy over time also sheds light on the changing tobacco culture and agrarian culture. The stories of raising tobacco in this chapter often point toward culture's influence on the manner in which the crop was grown. This influence ranges from the early days, when the goal was often to grow the highest quality crop possible, to now, where family work and life lessons still largely characterize one farmer's tobacco operation. Discussing this culture of tobacco helps explain why tobacco farming has persisted in Bethel for so long, in spite of various economic disadvantages. Going forward, the state of tobacco farming is entering a new era/system of production, likely indicating the complete end of mountain tobacco farming. This makes the continuation of the agrarian culture and economy of Bethel doubtful, and heightens the realization that Bethel's long standing social and community structure, which revolved in large part around tobacco, is close to permanently changing.

### **Raising burley—the early years**

Tobacco farming has deep roots in Bethel. At eighty-eight years old, C.B. Reese remembers raising tobacco with his family as a small child. Regarding the time-intensiveness of working the crop, Mr. Reese recounts: “it was a pretty slow deal, back when we started.” Those were the nascent years of tobacco farming in Bethel and in Watauga County. As I discussed in the previous chapter, tobacco as a cash crop arrived comparatively later in Watauga County than it did in other Appalachian and North Carolina mountain counties. Whereas Madison County, North Carolina, had a successful bright leaf tobacco economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and was quick to adopt burley in the 1920s and 1930s, in 1929, only 54 farms reported raising tobacco in Watauga County, marking the county’s first significant tobacco production (U.S. Census, 1930). Fifteen years later, in 1945, 1,437 farms reported raising tobacco in Watauga County (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1950). In between the late 1920s and 1945, a tobacco culture and economy developed in Watauga County, and the story in this section details how tobacco was grown and worked at that time and traces the emergence of Bethel’s tobacco economy and culture.

Tobacco work began in the winter and early spring of the year in Watauga County. Decades before farmers could drive to a greenhouse and buy hydroponic tobacco plants a few days before they set them, tobacco farmers raised their tobacco plants from seed themselves. This entailed making a plant bed to plant the tobacco seeds in to “start” the plants. “We’d find us a warm place in the holler somewhere where the wind didn’t hit,” recalls C.B. Reese. “We’d cut us a whole lot of brush and build us a brush heap. We’d dig up our ground good, you know, make our beds, then we’d pile a whole lot of brush on it and we’d burn that. To

kill the weed seeds in the ground.” Hite Reese, C.B. Reese’s son, remembers preparing tobacco beds the old way with his father and grandfather as a child. According to Hite Reese, burning the brush “wouldn’t kill everything [the weed seed], but it’d kill a lot of it.” After the brush pile had burned, then the bed was ready for seeds. C.B. Reese:

We’d take planks and build us sort of a box around the great big space, about a 50x50, and we’d sow our [tobacco] seed in that. That’s the way they started raising. We didn’t have no chemicals to kill the weed seed. That was pretty well on the start. Where I’m starting you raising them ‘baccar beds, burning them and sowing them, that’s the way they started raising tobacco.

Mrs. Ruth Reese’s father, Jim Eggers, also raised tobacco in the 1920s and 1930s (Mrs. Reese is married to C.B. Reese). “I’ve always heard my dad raised the first tobacco that was ever grown in this country,” said Mrs. Reese. “Around that old barn up Fork Branch. I’ve always been told.” Fork Branch runs up a small valley off Beaver Dam Road in the Bethel community; it’s a mile or two from where she and her husband, C.B. Reese, live now. The idea that Mrs. Reese’s father would have raised the first tobacco in Beaverdam (or in Bethel) is consistent with tobacco statistics from the 1930 U.S. Census, which stated that only 54 farms raised tobacco in 1929 and that just eight acres of tobacco was grown in 1924. Clearly, tobacco emerged for the first time in Watauga County in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Perhaps the next question to ask concerns why and how tobacco came to Watauga County. Where did Jim Eggers first get the idea to raise tobacco? Did someone from another county or state bring him seeds? Did he travel and bring purchased seeds back to Bethel, or was tobacco seed sold locally? A partial answer to this question is provided by Mr. R.G.

Shiple. At ninety-nine years old, Mr. Shiple remembers when tobacco first came to Watauga County, recalling that seed companies distributed seeds to local general stores for sale in the area. Mr. Shiple: “They would send their salesman out early [in the year] and supply the country stores with seed.” Mr. Shiple indicated that the seed companies were one of the main catalysts for the expansion of tobacco farming during this period. Furthermore, this recollection indicates Watauga County’s, and Bethel’s, participation in and further transition towards the market economy in the 1920s and 1930s.

Returning to the story of how tobacco was grown in the early years in Bethel, once the seeds were planted in the plant bed, they were watered and looked after until late spring. Then, come the last of May/first of June, the tobacco plants were transplanted from the plant bed and set out in the field. In those days, “we’d take an old pair of horses and plow us up about a half-acre, acre, and fix it down with our horses,” remembers C.B. Reese. This work prepared the field for the tobacco transplants. Next, a hand setter was used to set the tobacco plants in the ground. They were watered after their setting, and from then on were ready to grow in the half-acre or acre field. As the plants grew, however, so did the bugs. “We’d have to catch the bugs and worms by hand, to kill them,” said Mr. Reese. In those days, farmers did not have chemical sprays to kill insects as they would in the decades soon to come. So, this work was done by hand. It was labor intensive, but at the same time, the work was done for free by children and families as part of their daily lives and chores. And as chores often are, not all these tasks were enjoyable. Mrs. Reese, good-naturedly recalling her sister’s distaste for picking tobacco worms during their childhood, remarked: “Those great big green worms. Some people killed them off with a clothespin!”

Over the summer months, farmers and families would hoe the tobacco plants and cultivate them with a horse-drawn cultivator. As the plants continued to grow late into the summer, blooms would form out of the tops of plants. To get the most energy into the leaves of the tobacco plants, these blooms were “topped,” or broken out of the tobacco plants. After topping, farmers next had to “sucker” the tobacco. As the plants grow late in the summer, they develop sprouts between the main stalk and the leaves in the top third of the plant. These sprouts, or “suckers,” produce small, low quality leaves if they are not broken out. Again, they take energy away from the main leaves. So, in the early years of tobacco work, people went through the tobacco field row by row and broke the sucker sprouts out by hand. Topping and suckering were two labor-intensive jobs, but since tobacco crops were a half acre or a little more, families, parents, and children could manage this work.

After topping and suckering, the tobacco leaves began to ripen in the field in late summer. In late August/early September, the plants would be cut down in the field and then hung to cure. C.B. Reese recounts how this process was done in the first years of tobacco farming in Bethel:

We built us a scaffold out in the field, in the patch. We cut it [the tobacco] and hung it on them scaffolds, and let it wilt down in the field. My dad, he didn't even want it to touch the ground or nothing. The way we cut it, we didn't spear it. We had a thing, we called it a horse, and carried it along by the row. And we'd split that 'baccar stalk, and then we'd cut it off and hang it over that stick and put six stalks on the stick. We'd take it then and hang it on that scaffold in the field, let it wilt down a few days, and then we'd carry it and hang it up in the barns and old buildings.

Several things are worth noting from the above passage. First, Mr. Reese mentions cutting the stalk rather than spearing it on to a stick. The advent of the spear technique, which I'll discuss in more detail in the next section, made cutting tobacco somewhat faster but did not make it easier. The cutting work was still, and is still today, done by hand. This is one of the techniques/traditions that has changed little over time. Secondly, after cutting the tobacco, it needed to wilt down in the field before it was in the proper shape to hang. Once the tobacco had cured down some, and the green leaves had begun to fade yellow, then it was hauled to hang. Thirdly, the use of scaffolding and the carrying in of the sticks of tobacco indicates the great care farmers took with their crop. As Mr. Reese says, the scaffolding kept the tobacco off the ground during the week or so that it wilted down in the field, and this meant some extra work hanging the tobacco in the field. Similarly, carrying the tobacco in by hand meant not transporting it on sleds, wagons, or trailers, on the chance that it might bruise or damage the leaves. Mr. Reese's comments illustrate the important roles that quality and pride in work played in the early years of the tobacco economy in Bethel.

The tobacco cured in the barns all fall. Hung up slightly yellow, after wilting in the fields, the tobacco turns brown in the barns throughout the fall. Before stripping the leaves and grading could begin, the tobacco had to be just right. It had to get "in case." "You have to let it get in good 'case,'" says Larry Davis, 59, who still raises tobacco in Bethel. "It's damp enough to where you can handle it. Because when it dries out it gets real brittle, when it's dried. On a day like it rained today, you go check and see what 'case' it's in. How much moisture's in it." When the tobacco gets in case, when there is enough moisture in the leaves

to make it workable, but not so much that it's wet (which can ruin a crop after it's graded and tied/baled), then the stripping and grading process can begin.

Grading the tobacco started around the end of November/first of December once the tobacco was in case. Like other aspects of the tobacco work season, the method of grading has changed over time, in response to market demand. In the first decades of tobacco farming in Bethel, leaves were stripped from the stalk and sorted by color and quality (moving from the bottom of the stalk up toward the "tips" leaves at the top). Back then, six or seven grades of tobacco were the norm, and like cutting the tobacco, precision characterized this job. "My dad," said C.B. Reese, "he was so particular about grading he wouldn't hardly let us kids help him grade it. He'd make us carry it in, carry out the stalks [after they'd been stripped of leaves], do the work like that." The grading process, like scaffolding to keeping the tobacco off the ground, was diligent and difficult work. These men and women took pride, or personal prestige, in doing this work, and these approaches taken in the tobacco field taught generations of men and women in Bethel the value and necessity of hard work.

In the winter, tobacco leaves were stripped, graded, and tied into "hands." These hands consisted of several leaves of a certain grade, about as many leaves as any one person could hold in their hand, which were then wrapped together with another tobacco leaf (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). The hands of tobacco were then packed in baskets and later hauled to an auction market where tobacco company representatives bid on respective crops of tobacco. After the crop was sold, the payout for the year's work would be realized. If extra effort was taken to have the best quality tobacco, then, hopefully, a farmer could get a good price from the companies. "I remember one time dad had his fixed nice. He got the top dollar



out of it. Got \$.50 a pound out of it,” said C.B. Reese. Before the permanent advent of the tobacco program in the late 1930s, tobacco companies had no obligation to pay a baseline price for tobacco at auction. As is discussed in previous chapters, the unregulated nature of tobacco auctions made prices fluctuate and kept farmers in competition with each other. For farmers operating in a tough selling environment, having the best quality crop was one way to (hopefully) guarantee the crop would bring a good price.

As to the hard, long work involved in raising a tobacco crop, C.B. Reese says: “It was just about a year’s job.” In fact, the work overlapped: by the time tobacco was going to auction at the end of one year, farmers were already preparing plant beds for burning for the upcoming year. As part of a diversified work strategy, tobacco farming, from its nascence in Bethel, provided some cash income for families. At the outset, as evidenced by C.B. and Ruth Reese, the work was a family job, as children and parents worked in different capacities with the crop. In some ways, burley tobacco work has not changed that much over time in Bethel, but in other ways, it has changed a great deal. This section illustrates how tobacco was grown the old way, before modern inputs and equipment (i.e., chemical sprays, tractors, etc.) were available, and thus, it shows how Bethel’s subsistence-based moral economy began to transition to a more modern, market economy in the 1930s. While techniques such as preparing plant beds and hand tying tobacco have evolved over time, other aspects of tobacco farming from the early years have remained constant. Most notably, from the 1930s until today many tobacco crops in Bethel have remained small in size, allowing the continuation of family work in tobacco. Although this work pattern changed for some farmers and tobacco operations in the mountains (i.e., with hired labor and later migrant

labor), most farms continued to rely upon family labor throughout the years of the tobacco program. As is discussed in more detail later in the chapter, the use of family labor in tobacco work allowed parents and grandparents to pass on their farming traditions and teach hard work, responsibility, pride in a job well done, family reciprocity, and other life lessons to their children and grandchildren. This has been an important cultural tradition in Bethel, and its roots stem from the early days of tobacco farming.

### **Raising tobacco in the mid- to late-twentieth century**

Tommy Lawrence grew up farming tobacco in the 1950s and 1960s. It remained “all hands work,” as he called it, but the movement towards mechanization was underway and technological advancements were changing how farmers raised tobacco. Whereas plant beds were piled with brush and burned out in the early years, by the mid- to late-century farmers were preparing their own beds by gassing them to kill the weed seeds. In Bethel, and in many other burley producing areas, technological/modern advancements sometimes overlapped with traditional practices held over from the early years. “People started buying sprays to kill the weeds or the seed. But we always had to hoe it pretty regular,” says Mr. Lawrence. “We set it by hand. We used hand setters. In our case daddy ran the setter, mother dropped the plants, and us younguns carried water to them and covered the plants after they set them in the ground.” Topping the plants and breaking off the suckers was still hard work. “It was pretty labor intense, that’s one reason people didn’t have out a whole lot, because it’s a family operation. About everything was family,” said Mr. Lawrence.

At harvest, the tobacco was cut and put on speared sticks (an evolution from cutting the stalks described by C.B. Reese). The spear came along in the 1940s, and it is still used in

the field today. It's a hollow metal cone with a sharp point that fits on top of the four-foot wood sticks that have been set in the ground. Bill Sherwood, a retired tobacco and dairy farmer from Bethel, recounts the harvesting process: "You cut the stalk off, and you've got sticks you drive in the ground, and you've got a spear that goes on top of that. Spear the stalk down across that spear, and put it on the stick. Put six stalks to a stick, when it cures down a little bit, take it and hang it in the barn."

By the mid-twentieth century, changes in market demands and mechanization trends had begun to change this process. In the winter, after the tobacco had cured during the fall, stripping and grading began (as the tobacco got in case). Bill Sherwood remembers, "When we first started raising it, we made six grades, and then we got down to four grades. Finally got down to where we were making three grades, the last I raised it." Tommy Lawrence: "I can remember we had to do seven different grades. You had to know what you were doing. You had to be able to see it pretty good, the color difference up the stalk. Then we hand tied it."

"They bale it now," says Mr. Sherwood. "Back when we first started, or when I was first started, you had to tie it in hands. Then they got to baling it. Didn't have to tie it, I liked that pretty well." Baling the tobacco, rather than hand tying it and making baskets, saved labor time for farmers. Describing the baling technique, Mr. Sherwood says, "You've got a box, you just lay the tobacco down in there. We've got an air cylinder that we packed it with, mashed it down in there. If you're careful you can get by with putting about ninety or a hundred pounds [per bale]." The switch to baling also indicates how, by the mid- to late-twentieth century, tobacco crops were becoming more efficient and less centered around the

precise quality that drove farmers in the 1930s and 1940s. Whereas in the early years C.B. Reese's father wouldn't let his tobacco ever touch the ground, by the 1950s, 1960s, and onward, the general practice was for tobacco to cure on sticks in the field, touching the ground. Moreover, grading was becoming less particular, baling 80 to 100 pound bales saved some time, and using sprays and chemicals were becoming standard practice. By the 1970s and 1980s, the tobacco economy was a mixture of modern advances and traditional practices. In the years to come, this dynamic would continue to change.

In 1979, an epidemic of the fungicide "blue mold" ruined tobacco crops in the United States and Canada, causing an estimated \$250 million in losses for tobacco growers (Ruffy & Main, 1989). "That first year that it hit, it just destroyed a lot of crops. I mean totally. The leaves just went away," remembers Bill Sherwood. "We had topped it, and it was doing the best you ever saw, and then it hit. And all the bottom two-thirds of the leaves just dropped off. We had the top-third, maybe."

By 1979, now with a family of his own, Tommy Lawrence was running a meat market for an A&P food store in Abingdon, Virginia, "driving it," and raising tobacco part-time at home in Bethel. "I'd come home, and if I got home in time in the evening, I'd change clothes and run to that tobacco field and I'd hoe. Chop weeds, whatever needed to be done. Took days off, evenings and what not, was spent at that part-time job," recalls Mr. Lawrence. "Well, that was when the first blue mold come. I went to my patch one day and it was all wilted down. Looked like you poured hot water on it, or diesel or something. And dead.

"I decided then, after I had worked, took my days off, come in in the evening and grab a sandwich and go to work till dark, I quit then."

The story of the blue mold outbreak indicates a few important points about the state of burley tobacco farming by the late 1970s. First, like many other burley growers in Bethel and in Watauga County, Mr. Lawrence was raising tobacco and farming part-time. “Most everybody then after that [by the 1970s] began to be pretty much part-time. But you still had a lot of full-time farmers that did tobacco and/or cattle, one or both,” said Mr. Lawrence.

Sixty-two year old Hite Reese, C.B. and Ruth Reese’s son, worked two jobs as well. “I raised tobacco and went to logging on the side, too,” said Hite Reese. “Had a little portable mill, we sawed lumber, till they moved everything overseas.” Once furniture factories in nearby North Carolina counties began closing, the market for local timber started drying up, further changing the agrarian economy of Bethel and eroding another aspect of farmers’ multiple livelihood strategies.

After the years of C.B. and Ruth Reese’s childhood, and after the war years of the 1940s, small farming continued to become less of a subsistence economy as more families became integrated into the market economy. Regarding the changes in his lifetime, C.B. Reese says, “It’s a sight in the world how fast things is going. Ain’t no use of it,” Mrs. Ruth Reese: “People used to didn’t have all those expenses. You didn’t have a telephone, never had no light bills. Didn’t have all of today’s expenses.”

C.B. Reese: “We had to cut our wood with an ax and a cross cut. Had to wash our washing on an old washboard and boil it out. And we had to carry our water from the spring. And now, we’ve got to work just as hard. We’ve got to work out enough money to buy that washing machine. And we’ve got to work out enough money to buy that dryer. And all this

fancy—refrigerators, freezers, all that stuff we gotta buy now, we didn't have to pay for that them days.”

As the twentieth century progressed, small farming in Appalachia was increasingly tied to the greater economic changes taking place across the modern American landscape. The above quote from Mr. Reese illustrates the differences between the cash-based economy of today and the subsistence-based economy of Bethel during his childhood. When tobacco farming arrived in Bethel, it came at a time when farmers were transitioning more towards the cash-based market economy, and even though tobacco farming provided a steady source of annual income for tobacco farmers, it became harder to live off of. “It wouldn't sustain,” recalls Tommy Lawrence. “Their needs [tobacco farming families] got to be more than what their little crops would be.” And so by the 1960s, many farmers in Bethel were taking part-time, off-farm jobs.

The second point illustrated by mid-twentieth century burley farming concerns increasing problems with bugs and diseases and a growing reliance on sprays. The bugs, including budworms, flea beetles, and hornworms (or tobacco worms), could prove quite destructive to crops. Regarding hornworms, “They just eat it up, if you got a lot of them. They damage a crop a lot,” recalls Mr. Sherwood. To counter these bugs, a natural control was employed. “They came up with an insect that would kill those worms. It was a wasp type thing that would lay its eggs on these worms, and they in turn sucked the life out of the worm and killed it.” With regards to the use of chemicals and sprays, where sucker sprouts were once pinched out by hand, by the mid-twentieth century sucker spray could isolate the sprouts and stunt their growth. “They came out with sucker spray, you just squirt it in the top

of it and it kills the suckers, walk down through there and spray the top of it,” recalls Hite Reese. And the sprays proved effective: “It keeps them out, and saves you an awful lot of time,” says Bill Sherwood.

The blue mold outbreak provides a good example of how the use of sprays increased in tobacco farming over the course of the twentieth century. After blue mold hit, Mr. Sherwood remembers, “They came out with a spray for that. You could spray it, put it in the ground when you set the plant out and it wouldn’t take blue mold.” But this strategy did not solve the problem long-term. Mr. Sherwood:

The Ridomil [the spray] got to where it wouldn’t work and now they’ve got blue mold resistant varieties of tobacco to grow. Basically, they just don’t grow as fast. What happens is the blue mold gets it when it’s really growing it’s best, really growing a lot, tender. And it’s susceptible to it more.

Today, blue mold is completely resistant to Ridomil, and the disease is still active (Ivors & Mila, 2007). In the summer of 2010, blue mold lightly infected a burley crop in eastern Ashe County, North Carolina, prompting Tennessee agricultural officials to warn upper east Tennessee farmers to be on the lookout for signs of the disease (Denton, 2010). As tobacco farming progressed throughout the twentieth century, the use of sprays and chemicals increased, and the success or failures of crops became further tied to these technological advancements.

Using the sprays, then, is a complex situation. On the one hand, sprays such as sucker control save labor time in the field, and they work effectively. So, when farmers have multiple sources of income, working multiple jobs and raising tobacco on the side, a labor

saving control method is beneficial. In reality, the benefits of using sprays may have economically justified growing tobacco in an area where tobacco production was characterized by small acreages. Having saved time in the tobacco field, farmers were free to pursue other wage labor work.

But, on the other hand, what is the long-term cost of sprays, chemicals, and fertilizers, and is there some kind of middle ground between the old way and the more efficient way? Most obviously, the use of chemicals, sprays, and fertilizers has the potential to damage ecological and human health, and though these factors are outside the scope of this research, they are still important to note. For my purposes, the use of these inputs also point toward another problem: through the late 1990s and the 2000s, as burley prices dropped, input and labor costs rose, and because most farmers were dependent on sprays, fertilizers, and, increasingly, hired labor, the costs began to outweigh the profits. Shelby Eggers, a seventy-two year old tobacco farmer who grew 3,200 pounds for Burley Stabilization Corporation (BSC) in 2011, puts the inputs situation this way:

Tobacco fertilize this year (2011), will probably run, now this is 12-18-24, it's gonna be right at eight hundred dollars a ton. Fifteen years ago when were selling tobacco at \$1.85 a pound we were giving around two hundred dollars a ton for fertilize. Now we're selling tobacco for \$1.83 a pound and we're giving eight, eight hundred and fifty dollars for fertilize. Now that got out of hand.

Tommy Lawrence recalls the 2010 burley crop: "Last year, there's a lot of people that sold tobacco on the auction for \$.95 and you cannot produce tobacco for \$.95 a pound." That is only \$.45 cents a pound more than the price eighty-eight year old C.B. Reese's father got



decades ago. With the price of inputs rising and the unsupported price of tobacco at auction selling for \$.95 a pound, it is no wonder most farmers in the mountains have quit growing tobacco. “You can’t raise tobacco for that now days, [because of] sprays, fertilizer, plants,” says Hite Reese. “See people buy their plants now, used to we raised them ourselves. Now they buy water plants. So that’s another expense.”

Thus, over the course of the twentieth century and through the rise and fall of the tobacco program, we glimpse some of the complex issues that surround burley tobacco farming today. Moreover, we see the transition from “all hands work” farming to more industrialized techniques and the benefits and deficiencies therein. The use of inputs and hired labor, among other things, has reached the point today to prompt Hite Reese to speculate, “They [farmers] could make a little more money on tobacco if they done it a little more the hard way like we used to.” But is there an economic incentive for the hard work, the “all hands work,” that it would take to raise a crop of tobacco the old way, without sprays, chemicals, and fertilizers? Would this attention to detail even matter? Would today’s market reward a small but high quality tobacco crop that has been grown without chemicals and sprays? As the next sections show, the answer is likely not. The material advantage that small farmers in Bethel had was the tobacco program, which limited the amount of tobacco on the market and made tobacco grown in small allotments price competitive with tobacco from larger farms. Without the safety nets of the program, the costs associated with a modern tobacco crop overwhelmed most mountain growers, forcing them to quit raising tobacco.

### **Changes to the tobacco economy: 1990s and 2000s**

In 2004, the federal price support and marketing quota system for tobacco ended. After the “buyout” of the program, American grown tobacco joined the world tobacco market, competing with the price of tobacco from countries such as Zimbabwe and Brazil. Farmers with quota poundage cards received a payment, either lump sum or in ten-year installments, according to the amount of their poundage quota, and the tobacco market was deregulated. The buyout effectively ended nearly all tobacco production in the mountains. The few farmers who continued to raise tobacco in Bethel did so with direct manufacturer/company contracts and with significant uncertainty. Without tobacco, the remaining aspects of Bethel’s moral economy, held over from its subsistence-based past, were finally lost, and Bethel’s long transition to the modern economy was complete.

In the last years of the tobacco program, the national climate concerning burley tobacco farming began to reach a boiling point as neoliberals sought free trade and deregulation and as health groups worked to end federal support of tobacco farming, among other factors. In the midst of turmoil, basic burley quota prices fell by over half their value from 1997 to 2001 (Tiller, 2002). “They started cutting the quotas down. Every year they dropped,” says Larry Davis. “You had a certain amount of poundage on each farm, and they started cutting that a percentage every year just about.”

With quota values plummeting, the price of leasing quota began to rise as quota holders tried to compensate for lost income. Older farmers, and/or quota holders who no longer farmed, still participated in the tobacco economy by leasing their quota, land, and barns (van Willigen, 1989). And though leasing opportunities gave some tobacco farmers the

chance to grow more tobacco, with the dropping value of basic quota, raising a burley crop became even more difficult in the late 1990s and early 2000s. “The last year we grew 17 acres, I would buy poundage off approximately 50 or 60 people. To get enough to grow that 17 acres. I’d deal with that many people,” remarks Larry Davis. “They would have like two hundred pounds each, or two or three, four hundred pounds. We was growing between thirty and forty thousand pounds of tobacco, so you can imagine how many people I dealt with.” Because of the poundage restraints put in place by the program, for farmers such as Larry Davis, who wanted to grow more tobacco and who had a hired work crew, the obstacles of growing large crop began to outweigh the benefits. “They would want \$.25, \$.30 a pound just to lease their base,” recalls Hite Reese, speaking of leasing the base (permanent poundage) of a quota holder. “It got up to about \$.60, \$.75 a lot of times, just about half what you got out of it. You couldn’t afford to do it.” For farmers, having to go to these lengths did little to encourage their continued support for the program. Clearly, the program was breaking and wasn’t going to get fixed, as had occurred in 1970/71 (see Chapter 3). Ironically, though the end of the program may have looked like relief for tobacco farmers, once U.S. tobacco was deregulated, the price of domestic tobacco dropped to price levels from twenty years earlier, and small farmers in the mountains were quickly out-produced by larger, more concentrated tobacco regions.

The drop in quota values also indicates other changes in the burley tobacco economy. A more concentrated number of farmers in Watauga County were growing tobacco while fewer part-time farmers were raising any tobacco at all. The less valuable poundage cards systematically forced out part-time growers, because raising a couple of hundred pounds of

tobacco was not profitable or economically worthwhile. Then, because of the drop in quota value and as more part-time farmers stopped raising tobacco, more quota holders sold their basic quota, and this led, from a historical perspective of who grew tobacco, to an uneven distribution of buyout money once that time came. “On the last, there, people got to, like I say, they’d sell their whole base to somebody,” recalls Hite Reese. Mr. Reese:

They might get \$.75 and just sell it to you permanent. It was yours from then on.

They put it on your card and it stays there. Then when the buyout come out, you could sell it just like it was yours. If you had a lot of big base bought up, see, you got a big check right there. But if you didn’t, you just had your own base, it wasn’t that much.

Larry Davis speculates that the devalued poundage cards, which began in 1997, seem like a set-up for the buyout:

They done that, I think, because of the buyout, because they based it on how many pounds you have and how many you grow. But they really cut it, more than half than what they started out with. Like me, I had I think 6,000 pounds, they called it permanent poundage on my farm, by the time the buyout came I had 3,000 pounds of permanent poundage.

In just a few years, then, the value of Larry Davis’s base dropped by half, and when his buyout money came, it was essentially half of what it would have been just a few years before. Mr. Davis’ notion that quota values were intentionally lowered prior to the buyout is consistent with Benson’s (2012) claims that tobacco-state politicians after 1985, primarily in North Carolina, instead of working for the best interest of tobacco farmers and tobacco

communities (as they claimed they were), acted in collusion with tobacco companies to maximize tobacco company profit. Mr. Davis' account of the drop in burley quota values is a local reflection of neoliberalism's effects.

In those last years of the program and then *en masse* after the buyout, burley farmers began contracting directly with the tobacco companies. Without a price supported market, the price of tobacco at auction, in competition with world tobacco prices, dropped significantly, an estimated 25% in 2005, post-buyout (Tiller, Snell, & Brown, 2007). Three years after the 2004 buyout in Watauga County, only 11 farms reported raising tobacco. In 2002, 187 farms had reported (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007). This transition marked a new state (or system) in tobacco farming (Walker and Salt, 2006). The program was gone, and for those farmers still raising tobacco, they had to adapt to the structure of the new system, but for small farmers, this scenario continued to prove economically unfeasible.

Why, in this new era of tobacco farming, are Bethel and other small farming communities in the mountains limited in their participation in the tobacco economy? For one, regarding the contracting system, contracts are made year-to-year between companies and farmers, and the contracting company has enough control over the crop and its selling price to make farmers perpetually uncertain about their incomes. Under the program, this was not the case. Furthermore, this uncertainty complicates investments in labor and equipment. Secondly, the deregulated system of growing tobacco, similar to other industrialized agricultural operations, necessitates larger farms with more tillable land, more mechanization, and more hired labor, and these factors effectively make tobacco from small farms, such as those in Bethel, obsolete.

For burley growers, selling and raising tobacco under contract with a tobacco company is starkly different from the days of selling at auctions. “Most farmers used to enjoy going to an auction, [to] take their tobacco,” recalls Tommy Lawrence. “It was always an interesting thing watching the auctioneer go down through, and the buyer’s following him, bidding on different piles of tobacco depending on what the company needed.”

Tobacco auctions were a communal gathering place, and a part of the tobacco culture. Farmers had their routines, such as those who wanted to be first into the warehouse, and thus would park their load outside well in advance of the warehouse opening. Mr. Lawrence remembers trucks lined up for a half mile in Boone, trying to get in for the first day’s sale, in hopes of getting the best price. Once inside the warehouse, farmers still jockeyed for a high price: “I’ve seen people cut all kinds of signs, from setting their younguns on the bales of tobacco to get the buyer to get them a little extra,” remembers Tommy Lawrence.

Even with the baseline support prices for tobacco, growers from across the region would take their crop to wherever they thought they could get the highest price. In the mid- to late-twentieth century, tobacco warehouses dotted the region. At one time, there were three warehouses in Boone and one in Mountain City, Tennessee. A price a penny higher at a warehouse could make a significant monetary difference—for the warehouse and the farmer. So, sometimes a warehouse worker might get on the radio and tell how tobacco was selling, as an advertisement, to get farmers to their auction. Other times, however, more direct marketing took place. For the farmer, if an auction in Tennessee would pay for a fuel bill, as was the case at times for Hite Reese, then that’s where he would go. “They’d do what they could to get you to bring your tobacco, because they got the sale bill off of it, you see,”

recalls Mr. Reese. One farmer also notes this point, and brings up the clout farmers sometimes had at auction:

Warehouse people would actually kick big growers money back under the table, to bring your product over here. Because the more they sold the more money they made. They would go to the buyers and say ‘Now, this man needs a little more out of this tobacco,’ if you didn’t felt like you got a fair shake. He was your mediator.

Since the buyout, most tobacco warehouses have closed, and farmers now sell their tobacco directly to companies. The cultural event of the auction sale, the culmination of the year’s work, is no longer a part of the tobacco economy. Farmers now sell straight to the company and receive whatever price the company deems appropriate.

As the twenty-first century drew closer, the farming family of Bethel increasingly felt the impacts of the globalization of American agriculture. In turn, the emphasis on reciprocal exchange between neighbors declined as more community members participated in more off-farm and less locally connected work. Specifically, fewer people were raising and working tobacco. As less people worked locally, local businesses had less incentive to be concerned about the locality. Somewhere along the way, people and businesses began to look after themselves, so to speak. This indicates a shift from the historic moral economy, whereby friends, family, and neighbors worked more closely together for the preservation/good of the community, to a modern economy, which emphasizes individual success and competition. For example, in 2010, Shelby Eggers bought his fertilizer in Shady Valley, Tennessee, instead of locally in Watauga County. In Shady Valley, the storeowner paid for the taxes on Mr. Eggers’ fertilizer, lowering the overall cost. Mr. Eggers:

You give seven hundred dollars a ton for it [fertilizer] and he takes care of the taxes, that helps you right smart there, compared to what it is if you bought it over here in Mountain City or over here in North Carolina. And I've about decided if you can save a hundred bucks you need to save a hundred bucks. I used to think that you gotta spend your money locally to keep everything in the local going, but whenever it gets out to—in a year's time when you can go twenty five miles down the road and save yourself a thousand or so dollars over the year, well you just need to go on down there. Because these people you've been trying to keep going over the years, if you've got a bad year they don't care one bit for it.

Mr. Eggers' comments reveal Bethel's community-wide transition away from a moral economy, characterized by such things as reciprocal exchange, towards a fully modern economy whereby individual profit trumps community well-being. The historic stability of the tobacco program, which allowed for aspects of the moral economy to remain strong in Bethel, caused the total transition to the modern economy to occur much later in Bethel than it did in other American farming regions characterized by larger and more concentrated farms, such as those in the Midwest in the 1980s (Dudley, 2000). Bethel, and likely other agrarian mountain communities, held out longer against the full force of the modern economy than most other agricultural communities in the United States. Once the program began its decline in the late 1990s, however, the free market culture of the lowest price began to work its way into the farming culture and economy of Bethel.

As fewer farmers in Watauga County raised tobacco into the 1990s, a handful of farmers tried expanding their operations, by leasing quotas and hiring more help. "Some



people tried it by putting out a whole lot and having to hire a lot of help, but that took about all of what they were making,” says Tommy Lawrence. “Through here it’s always been pretty much what you can handle and do yourself. If you tried to raise a two-acre crop and hire a lot of it done, you’d be wasting your time.”

Into the late 1990s and up until the buyout, Larry Davis hired a few Mexican workers who worked first as seasonal labor, and then later, more permanently, working nine months out of the year and living on his farm. “Of course, we did other jobs besides tobacco, to fill in between,” says Larry Davis. “After the buyout, that’s when we downsized because the price of tobacco dropped so much. We had to eliminate labor and everything.” The larger operations in Watauga County, such as the 16 or 17 acres put out by Mr. Davis, did not compare to the size of the operations in nearby places such as the foothills of east Tennessee, where small or medium-sized tobacco farms often ranged from five to twenty acres (Donaldson, 2011). When the price of burley dropped after the buyout, the limited availability of arable land in the mountains curtailed the expansion of tobacco operations. Under the program, this mattered less, because farmers were ensured a competitive price for their crop, regardless of whether it was grown in a two acre patch or on a hundred acre farm.

Now, for the handful of growers still active in Bethel, hiring migrant labor to help cut or hang a few acres of tobacco is typically not a viable economic option, even though most of the migrant labor did good work and knew how to work tobacco. And, since fewer people grow tobacco, the skills it requires have concomitantly declined. Tommy Lawrence:

You have to have some help on occasions, like cutting or hauling it in. And that’s getting hard to find, somebody that knows how to cut tobacco’s getting real hard to

find. It's not something that you can kind of teach somebody and afford to pay them. There's a rhythm to it. You can find a few, especially some Hispanics that have done it a lot, that are very cost efficient. But a lot of the younger people don't [can't work the tobacco].”

Finding good help, and finding people who can work seasonally, is one more challenge for today's small burley farmers. One farmer notes the difficulty of hiring help from the local area, and perhaps speaks to a changing cultural and economic climate: “the help around here just got to where it wasn't around. And what was around was either smoking ol' wacky weed, [or] drinking beer.”

Because of the small scale of tobacco farms in Bethel, and because the current market favors tobacco that can be grown the cheapest and most efficiently, tobacco farming now supports little more than family (or very small) operations in Bethel. Of the handful of growers left, Mr. Davis and his wife do most of their tobacco work themselves. Mr. Lawrence and his family do their own work and hire some help at cutting time. Shelby Eggers does his tobacco work with a local helper, Braxton Johnson, and in 2011, hired a migrant crew from Roan Mountain, Tennessee, to cut and hang his tobacco. Mr. Eggers: “They come over and cut it for you. They'd do it all if you wanted but you can't afford to. The only thing you can make off tobacco now is what little you can do the work yourself, make pretty good wages for what you do yourself.”

#### **At the mercy of the buyer: Selling direct to the company**

Under the contracting system, the process of selling tobacco is quite different than the auction. “It's simplified a whole lot, because you have an appointment now,” says Tommy

Lawrence. Well, simplified in the sense that, according to Larry Davis, “It’s got more complicated than it used to be.” If the same point can be from two opposing comments, then it is this passing remark from Tommy Lawrence: “The warehouse down there now is just as clean as a pin.” Mr. Lawrence’s remark to the cleanliness of the tobacco warehouse speaks a great deal to the new atmosphere of selling tobacco under contract, as identified by Benson (2008), both literally in the ultra-efficient (and antithesis of the auction) company receiving station and symbolically in regards to the tight control companies maintain over the terms of direct contracts. This new system of selling straight to the company is a major change in the burley culture and economy, and new rules and standards that increase efficiency at the receiving station might subsequently force smaller growers out of the tobacco economy.

In the past, tobacco was tied in hands and then packed in baskets and sold at auction. In the mid-twentieth century, leaves were air compressed into 80 to 100 pound bales. Currently, receiving stations are transitioning towards a more efficient method of baling. “Now they’ve went to 400 to 700 pound bales. They’re forcing everybody to go to that now. They can handle it with a forklift,” says Larry Davis. The bigger bales enable the receiving stations to unload faster by eliminating hand-lifting the bales. Though this might be more efficient for the company, it puts a strain on small tobacco farmers who would need to invest in new baling equipment. Tommy Lawrence:

When they innovate these new procedures, such as the big bales, it puts a hardship on a smaller farmer because he don’t know that he’s gonna have a contract next year—well, large ones don’t either—but, you don’t always know. You may have to give eight, ten thousand dollars for a tobacco baler. Well, that’s a lot of money out of a

crop of tobacco. Now if you know you're gonna be able to use it year after year, it's an investment. But, the scary part is you don't know...if you're gonna be able to use it or not.

For small tobacco farmers, the advent of the big bales might push those remaining out of the tobacco business. As Mr. Lawrence suggests, buying an expensive baler is a risky investment for farmers who have no long-term assurances about whether they can raise tobacco. It could be the step, and the risk, that many small farmers are not willing to take. As of 2011, the 80 to 100 pound bales are still accepted by the receiving stations.

Once the tobacco is unloaded at the company receiving station it is checked for moisture content. "Now," says Larry Davis, "it's electronic. It checks the moisture in it. It runs it between two electronic things and it scans it for moisture content in those bales. And it can't be over 23% moisture." Tommy Lawrence: "Most companies like 23% percent as your cutoff. A lot of the export people like it about 19 [%]. Just to make sure they don't have any molding or heating."

After the moisture content is determined, the tobacco is assigned a price—in a much different fashion than the former bidding process at auction. Tommy Lawrence:

Now, you take it [the tobacco] in, and when it goes through, of course the grader's standing there and you're looking at it. And he punches in your grade and it pops up on a screen. And you're just standing there, you're just looking at the screen. And he says 'I'll give you a DR1' or whatever the grades may be, whatever he gives you. That price is already set. It'll jump up and tell you how much it weighed, what the

moisture content was, and how much per pound you got. When you get through you go to the office and get your check.

For a few years in the 2000s, Larry Davis took his tobacco to a Philip Morris receiving station in Gray, Tennessee:

All they do, they unload your tobacco, the square bales and just band it up, run it through the machine that checks the moisture and it goes down a roller bed, and there's a Philip Morris representative, he puts his grade on it, and it reflects a certain price. Either you take it or reject it. Just have to take it back home. You're at the mercy of the buyer. Whatever he says he'll give for it, that's it.

Whereas the tobacco program once provided farmers with a competitive minimum price for their crop, growers today have little choice but to take whatever price, with no predetermined minimum, that the company offers. And with the influx of foreign tobacco, prices are significantly lower now than before the buyout in 2004. In 2010, Larry Davis raised about 17,000 pounds of tobacco. He sold the crop in Greenville, TN:

The last load I took to Philip Morris, all they give me for it was a dollar and three cents average. I didn't have no choice, either take it or bring it back home and keep it. And they don't like left over tobacco. A dollar a pound is what it brought twenty-five years ago.

Without government involvement in the price and supply of tobacco, small growers face a tenuous future. Receiving stations are moving to bigger bales; year-to-year contracts leave farmers uncertain about future crops and investments; tobacco prices have dropped; and input and labor costs continue to rise. Moreover, cooperative associations no longer

manage the pool and price of tobacco, and, as in the case of Burley Stabilization Corporation (BSC), they now contract and buy tobacco to resell it. As the number of contracts tobacco companies sign with farmers continues to decline, BSC has made up some of the difference by purchasing American burley for resell in other markets, primarily to China, according to BSC board member, R.G. Shipley. Under the program, growers had the cooperatives as an organization and advocate for their well-being. Now, with direct company to farmer contracts and the loss of the auction, farmers are isolated from one another regarding the marketing of their crop. They must take whatever price the company deems appropriate. Moreover, companies maintain more control over the tobacco growing process now than during the program years, stipulating in contracts what variety of plants and what sprays farmers must use. The companies, however, without the restraints of the program, operate with less oversight and regulation in regards to buying tobacco from growers. According to Shelby Eggers, “You’ve got nobody watching the big boys. The farmer’s at the mercy of the company now.”

### **The new stable state of the tobacco economy**

With the influx of lower priced foreign tobacco, the loss of price supports and marketing quotas since the 2004 buyout, the loss of the auction, the changing role of the cooperatives, the increased cost of inputs and labor, the advent of big bales, and with uncertainty surrounding future tobacco contracts, among other things, the current state of tobacco farming in Bethel is drastically different from what it was just a decade or two ago. The end of the federal tobacco program in 2004 marked a critical transition period in the American tobacco economy. Prior to 2004, the tobacco economy operated within the sphere

of the tobacco program, and this was its “stable state” or, recalling Walker’s & Salt’s (2006) resilience thinking theory, its conservation state (K), whereby things change slowly over time and pressures are absorbed. If the pressures are absorbed and deflected, the system, in this case the tobacco farming economy under the program, proves its resiliency and maintains its basic functions and continues on, but once the system’s resiliency begins to weaken, it becomes increasingly susceptible to a release phase ( $\Omega$ ) where things change rapidly. In the tobacco economy, the buyout of the program corresponds to a release phase ( $\Omega$ ). The next step in this process, then, involves the reorganization of the system (the tobacco economy) and the restarting of this adaptive cycle process. Since 2004, the tobacco economy has been in the reorganization ( $\alpha$ ) and growth (r) phase, whereby new innovations ( $\alpha$ ), such as contracting, the use of big bales, electronic moisture checking, etc., emerge as part of a new tobacco economy (r).

As it pertains to Bethel and to mountain tobacco farmers, this new system, and its new innovations that will eventually become standard (thus becoming the conservation phase), severely limits the participation of small tobacco growers. Because the new system favors efficiency in the growing and selling process of tobacco and prefers fewer contracts with farmers, larger and more concentrated tobacco operations will continue to characterize the American tobacco economy. Chiefly, this new tobacco economy developed because of the adoption of neoliberal market policies at the national and international levels (Benson, 2012; Kingsolver, 2011). The push for free trade and deregulated markets, in tandem with tobacco companies’ backdoor establishment of foreign leaf production markets, and in concert with various health groups’ displeasure with the federal government’s support of

tobacco farming, paved the way for the complete erosion of the federal tobacco program in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Benson, 2012). This new deregulated state of the tobacco economy places the small U.S. burley grower, most critically those with less tillable land, in an ill-fated situation. From the viewpoint of a tobacco company that favors efficiency in tobacco production, for example, dealing with lots of farmers from Watauga County with a few thousand pounds of tobacco each is less desirable than dealing with one farmer from anywhere with a hundred thousand pounds of tobacco. This is what the market demands today: tobacco that can be grown in large quantities, cheaply and efficiently, for this produces the most profit for tobacco companies. For small growers, such as those in Bethel and in the mountains, this new tobacco economy likely signals the end of the tobacco growing era and the loss of a longstanding culture and way of life.

### **Conclusion: Bethel's culture and economy of burley tobacco**

In the 1930s and the developing years of Bethel's tobacco economy, the market demanded something other than efficiency from small tobacco farmers. Tobacco at that time was grown with extreme care and caution, as evidenced by C.B. Reese's recollections about his father's "fixed nice" tobacco crop earlier in this chapter. Concerning the grading process, Mr. Reese's father hardly let the children help grade, because that work had to be done right or the year's work might not pay out. Back then, in the 1930s in Bethel, a high quality crop was one way for a small grower, if the auction went well, to get the best price out of their tobacco. Quality was a type of safety net. Remarking on this period in the tobacco economy, Wendell Berry (2004) writes in *Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy*: "There was a clear relation between quality and price, and the skill and effort that went into the production of fine



tobacco were repaid...The aim was no less than perfection” (p. 8). Over the course of the twentieth century, this emphasis on quality tobacco declined as time and labor saving devices, such as the advent of nitrogen fertilizer use, sucker spray, gassing plant beds, baling, and fewer grades of tobacco, to name a few things, were introduced and the market demand for the highest quality tobacco decreased. Before the establishment of the program and in the program’s early years, the risk in time and effort was likely too great for tobacco not to be as near perfect as possible. A quality crop enabled farmers to stay competitive. Inherently, though, with the onset of the program and the safety nets it provided farmers, there was less economic incentive for such time intensive methods. Furthermore, with regards to Bethel, as tobacco became more of a part-time job and a partial income source for small growers throughout the twentieth century, labor/time saving approaches helped farmers better manage multiple livelihood strategies.

In the twentieth century, the program accomplished something in the tobacco economy that prior to the 1930s had been impossible: it provided long-term economic stability for tobacco farmers. In Bethel, the program actually ushered in the tobacco economy where no tobacco production had previously existed. And in so doing, with agrarian communities such as Bethel raising tobacco crops year after year, with the yearlong nature of the work cycle, with the yearly repetition of tasks and talk of tobacco, a culture of burley tobacco, and a culture of farming in general, developed and continued throughout the twentieth century. In Bethel, the culture of tobacco farming emerged in tandem with the rise of the tobacco economy in the 1930s. Even as the tobacco economy changed during the twentieth century, the culture of the crop continued on, and now, post-buyout, this culture,

and what it represents to the people who still grow tobacco, perpetuates a few remaining tobacco farms in Bethel in an uncertain economic climate.

After quitting tobacco for six years following the blue mold outbreak (1979-1985), in 1985 Tommy Lawrence stopped working for A&P food stores, took over the Stone Mountain General Store in Bethel, and returned to tobacco farming part-time. “Those are choices you just have to make,” says Mr. Lawrence. For Mr. Lawrence the store provided an opportunity to watch the community grow up and to help neighbors. On returning to tobacco farming:

It was more to give my children something to do. I’m not a hard person but I don’t believe in spending your time with the Wii games and that stuff. I actually look forward to getting my grandchildren out [working]. And of course my sons already do that. So they’re teaching theirs. It’s not so much about teaching somebody how to farm, but how to work with their hands. To think about things. If we could have grown anything else [besides tobacco], we would have. But farming, if it’s something you enjoy, you just like to do it. When you learn to be challenged by trying to grow a better product every year, or more pounds on the acre, or just the fact that you can get out and work in the ground, that’s a whole lot of what farming is. It’s not so much a livelihood as it is a way of life.

Currently in the twenty-first century, there are other ways to make the money that tobacco farming income traditionally provided. Some people might work more off the farm, some might have left farming altogether, and some might raise more cattle, among other options. But, what is certain is that very few people who once raised tobacco in the mountains do so now. The tradition and economy of small scale mountain tobacco farming is

nearly gone. The old hanging barns still dot the landscape of mountain fields and farms but most no longer house tobacco. In this farming tradition, mothers and fathers have taught the skills required to raise tobacco to sons and daughters, and as Mr. Lawrence says, these children grow up to teach theirs. This is the culture of tobacco farming. Over the last eighty years in Bethel, raising tobacco has provided income and economic incentive for farm families, but increasingly, it has provided and perpetuated an agrarian way of life that otherwise would have fallen to the wayside long ago. For lots of people, it has been good work. Wendell Berry (1975) writes, “In the work is where my relation to this place comes alive. The real knowledge survives in the work, not in the memory. To love this place and hold out for its meanings and keep its memories, without undertaking any of the work, would be to falsify it” (p. 53). Over the years, then, the work of tobacco farming in Bethel has helped provide meaningful ways of life and kept the social capital of the community alive and active.

Even though tobacco money in the mountains mostly provided partial incomes for farmers, it often went towards paying for things such as college tuitions, property taxes, weddings, and Christmas gifts, and thus served an important cultural function. Because of the structure and stability of the tobacco program, small scale tobacco farming allowed agrarian communities, such as Bethel, to maintain aspects of their traditional social connections and ways of life. Tobacco farming allowed these mountain communities to undertake the work of the place, and therefore, to “hold out for its meanings and keep its memories” (Berry, 1975, p. 53). With the loss of tobacco farming, that cultural connection is nearly gone in Bethel and in most other mountain tobacco communities. Going forward, as more people work in jobs

away from the community, these long-standing connections and the social capital they once provided will lessen. Furthermore, without tobacco farming, what will become of farming as a job and vocation in Bethel in the future? Logging has declined over the years. Dairy operations have consolidated across the country and are now non-existent in Bethel and Watauga County. Christmas tree farming is prevalent but increasingly dominated by large operations or absentee owners. Beef cattle, however, still provide some farm income. The farming economy of Bethel, which was once characterized by its diversified nature, has been severely weakened over the years. Until the buyout of 2004, nearly 200 people raised tobacco in Watauga County, producing close to one million pounds (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007). Even though the tobacco economy of the mountains was comparatively small, it fostered a greater agrarian culture and economy. Now, without tobacco income and, perhaps more importantly, without the continuation of tobacco work, the agrarian culture and economy of Bethel is waning and its future is in doubt. Echoing Wendell Berry's (1975) sentiment regarding knowledge surviving in the work, tobacco farming allowed farmers and farm families in Bethel to maintain their cultural traditions, holding out for their meanings and memories.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

### **Introduction**

Tobacco farming in the southern Appalachian Mountains has come and gone. Most tobacco warehouses in the mountains have closed and the majority of former tobacco farms are no longer producing tobacco (Jarrell, 2011; U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007). In Watauga County, the tobacco economy is virtually extinct, and the only tobacco culture left is in Bethel, where a remnant of farmers still raise a few acres of tobacco. The future of tobacco farming in Bethel is doubtful. What's left of Bethel's tobacco economy and culture is a tobacco industry directive away from being gone for good. Philip Morris, the driver of the tobacco industry and tobacco policy, could permanently end small tobacco farming in the mountains if they mandated the use of big bales. As farmers in Bethel have said, small tobacco farmers can not economically justify purchasing big balers for their crops. With unguaranteed year-to-year contracts, a multi-thousand dollar big baler poses a serious economic risk. A policy mandating big bales would in all probability finally end the culture and economy of tobacco farming in the mountains, because the few farmers left likely would not be willing to take the economic risk.

Even though tobacco farming largely died out after the termination of the federal tobacco program in 2004, a few mountain farmers continued to raise the crop in places where tobacco farming was most entrenched. Bethel is one of these places. Now, eight years after the buyout of the program, only three tobacco farmers remain in Bethel, signaling the end of Bethel's agrarian culture and economy unless another alternative is found. With tobacco

gone, is there anything on the horizon that could help resuscitate this agrarian way of life in the mountains? In recent years, great strides have been made in sustainable agricultural movements and organic farm developments in Appalachia, and I find that this emerging agrarian movement shares commonalities with the historical development of the tobacco program. Emulating the methods used to develop the tobacco program could provide sustainable agriculture movements in Appalachia with long-term success, possibly reviving fading agrarian cultures and economies.

### **Losing an agrarian way of life**

Over the course of tobacco's run in Watauga County, from the 1930s to the early 2000s, tobacco culture and the tobacco economy were not mutually exclusive. Although tobacco incomes in the mountains often came from small ½ acre to 2 acre crops, and thus only provided for portions of overall incomes, tobacco money helped perpetuate the culture and economy of tobacco farming. Historically in Bethel, the money that tobacco farming provided often went towards paying for important cultural items. Men and women raised tobacco to help pay for weddings. Tobacco income went towards paying for property taxes and Christmas gifts. Teenage children raised tobacco in partnerships with parents and grandparents, learning about life, responsibility, and making money. These are just a few examples of how the tobacco economy has influenced the tobacco culture and vice versa in Bethel and Watauga County over the years.

Today, then, it is impossible for tobacco culture to exist without a tobacco economy. Without both parts working in concert with each other, either one alone represents just a hollow shell of the whole. There is the possibility that a tiny number of small tobacco

farmers will buy big balers and continue to raise tobacco as part of the “hobby” culture of farming. For example, one older east Tennessee tobacco farmer bought a large and expensive piece of tobacco equipment that was quite excessive in regards to the work required. He was essentially just “fooling around” with tobacco farming as a hobby (personal communication, Susanna Donaldson, 2012). He could have just as easily bought a bass boat, a motorcycle, or an RV, depending on his interests. I find this point significant, because it highlights the connections between the tobacco economy and tobacco culture. Without tobacco income, tobacco culture cannot survive. It will only become a characterization of itself and another activity preserved from the past that has no real meaning in the present. To refer again to Wendell Berry’s (1975) work, *A Continuous Harmony*, a place’s knowledge survives in its work. Memory alone will not perpetuate the social capital a place once held. It must be worked for.

And so, without tobacco farming in the mountains, farming in general, as a way of life and livelihood, is in question going forward. Can farming in Watauga County, which now typically consists of only cattle and at times Christmas tree farms, survive in the years to come? As farming increasingly becomes more of a hobby and less of an important source of income, the agrarian culture that has traditionally characterized Bethel and other mountain communities will disappear.

### **An emerging agrarian culture and economy**

In the midst of farming’s decline an interesting phenomenon is occurring: local, small-scale, sustainable, and organic agriculture is blossoming, with regards to both the consumer market and to farm livelihoods. Although some former tobacco farmers have

transitioned into organic operations, many more have not. What would it take for former farmers to return to farming via sustainable agriculture? Two groups in Appalachia, Community Farm Alliance in Kentucky and Appalachian Sustainable Development in southwestern Virginia, have been diligently working to expand small-scale sustainable agriculture in the region by creating structural conditions, spanning the local to the state and national levels, conducive to the success of organic, small-scale farms. Similar to the emergence of the tobacco program in the 1930s, for sustainable agriculture to take hold and find success long-term, meaningful national-level legislation and support must be attained. Although the current neoliberal political and economic climate makes this proposition questionable at best, the historic success of the tobacco program shows that a system of government support for small farms can be successful but that it must be worked for and maintained by key leaders from local, regional, state, and national levels.

As a part of this new agricultural emergence, farm groups and cooperatives have been and are continuing to integrate former tobacco farmers into the fabric of sustainable agriculture. Some farmers, who are game to the challenge of growing and marketing new crops and practicing new techniques, have transitioned to organic or sustainable agriculture. Notably, in Watauga County, a former tobacco farmer switched his tobacco farm to an organic vegetable operation and has had success in this new venture. With help from grants, extension and university agents, and by cofounding cooperative organic marketing groups, this farmer has shown that transitioning from tobacco to organics is possible. Within the county and the region, he is often referenced as a success story in terms of transitioning from tobacco to organic farming. Still, not all farmers' situations were the same and not every



tobacco farmer has followed this path. Moreover, the “gold rush” days of organic agriculture in the mid-2000s, when lots of new organic growers sought and found emerging markets, are over. But, it has been possible, at least for some in Watauga County, to continue farming as a livelihood and way of life in the mountains.

What would it take for sustainable agriculture to extend to more former tobacco farmers, to the children and grandchildren of tobacco farmers, and to all others hoping to make a living from farming in the future? For organic and small scale farming to sustain long term, and subsequently for the agrarian culture and economy of the mountains to reorganize, organic growers, small farmers, cooperatives, marketing groups, buyers, and many others, must continue to work towards scaling up initiatives from the local level to state and national levels, fight for policy change, and connect with sympathetic key leaders holding influential positions. These initiatives correspond to the propositions put forth by Gaventa and McGee (2010) that outline the methods necessary to “making change happen.” With regard to Appalachia, two well established groups, the Community Farm Alliance (CFA) in Kentucky and Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD) in southwestern Virginia, provide examples of how scaling up is currently being worked out.

An active group since the 1980s, CFA has taken the lead in supporting sustainable agriculture in Kentucky. Having spent years organizing on the grassroots level, CFA initiatives have scaled up to make policy changes on the state level. As one example, CFA work in the 1990s led to the 2000 passage of a Kentucky House Legislature bill that dispersed tobacco settlement money (from the 1998 Master Settlement) to more farmers than would have been initially rewarded. At the start, counties in Kentucky were deemed “tobacco

dependent” based on the number of pounds of tobacco they produced. Obviously, this worked to the disadvantage of Appalachian counties where smaller farms predominated. In response, CFA held farmer meetings, engaged in dialogue with politicians on the state level, and succeeding in redefining tobacco dependency by mapping county dependency as the number of tobacco farms, tobacco per capita income, and the amount grown (pounds produced; Billings et al, 2010). County councils then awarded the settlement money to tobacco growers transitioning from tobacco to other crops. Building off this success, CFA has continued to scale up and engage the state level by working to increase the number of farmer’s markets across Kentucky and by working to get state laws passed that mandate or recommend local food purchases at state institutions. Building community/grassroots organizations, CFA has worked to establish a processing and marketing center in eastern Kentucky for local foods and supported the emergence of farmer’s markets and local food infrastructure in low-income urban areas. In all of their work for small farmers and Kentucky agriculture, CFA shows how a community-based organization that engages state politics can bring about change (Billings et al, 2010).

In southwestern Virginia, Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD) works to transition tobacco farmers to sustainable agriculture, in part by providing processing and marketing infrastructure. In 1999, ASD began marketing local organic produce to the regional grocery store, Food City. Utilizing a standardization technique, ASD trademarked their produce “Appalachian Harvest,” demarcating their food as locally grown (Halweil, 2003). Getting Appalachian Harvest food on the shelves of grocery stores added to the legitimacy of ASD’s work. More farmers signed up to participate in the succeeding years,

and in 2010, demand outpaced supply by over 200 percent (Flaccavento, 2010; Halweil, 2003). As of today, ASD continues to help farmers transition to sustainable agriculture. They offer workshops and teaching seminars, and continue to market local food to area stores under the Appalachian Harvest trademark, among other things.

Still, for ASD and similar programs to succeed long-term, they need local, state, and national government support. Leaders of these programs recognize this and are working to scale up—Flaccavento (2010) cites the Appalachian Regional Commission’s “Asset Based Development” program and the USDA’s Community Facilities Loan Program as good steps in this direction. But getting significant national support and state and university support for organic agriculture and research continues to be a difficult task (Halweil, 2003). To the point, many of these transition programs began with funding from the 1998 Tobacco Master Settlement plan, which used money won from tobacco companies to transition farmers out of tobacco. With that funding running out, and with the last tobacco buyout payment to quota holders coming in 2014, financial support for tobacco farmers and emerging organic farmers is dwindling. Though ASD has had successes, its financial situation and funding is not secure long term; without more government support, the future development and success of groups such as ASD is in question (“Presentation,” 2011). Scaling up, finding key leaders within state governments and the federal government, and building broad consensus are critical for the success of these programs.

The historic success of the tobacco program (see Chapter 3), with regard to stabilizing farm livelihoods and ways of life, opens the door to this question: could an initiative similar to the tobacco program work for sustainable agriculture today? Would a sustainable

agricultural program and a reworking of agricultural subsidies foster a stable and long term small farming economy in Appalachia? If it could, this would plausibly lead to the rebirth of the agrarian culture and economy of the mountains. Obviously an organic “program” could not be an exact replica of the tobacco program; there would be structural changes and new wrinkles added. But by paying attention to the way the program developed, much can be learned towards these ends.

How could a sustainable agricultural program be achieved? As mentioned above, scaling up from the local to the national policy level and continuing to empower local and regional cooperatives and groups is a crucial first step towards any long term agrarian movement. Following the lead of groups such as CFA and ASD, developing regional and local distribution centers is an essential element with regards to growing and sustaining a new small farming economy. Simultaneously, investing in the infrastructure necessary for a successful sustainable agriculture economy is key. Extension agents, university programs, instructors, officials, grant/funding money, and growing and marketing standards are all important elements of this infrastructure factor (Gaventa & McGee, 2010). Without adequate infrastructure support, sustainable farming will not succeed long term.

Perhaps most important, however, support must come from the national level. The central factor in the development of the tobacco economy and culture throughout the twentieth century was federal support for the creation of the tobacco program in the 1930s. The price supports and marketing quotas of the federal tobacco program absolutely sustained the culture and economy of tobacco farming in the United States. Without the program, tobacco farming in the mountains would have ended many years before 2004. In the case of

Watauga County, where tobacco production did not begin until the 1930s, a tobacco economy might never have started or sustained without the safety nets the program provided for farmers. In the 1930s, the federal government went to bat for American farmers. Though there are pertinent criticisms of New Deal agricultural legislation, namely, that the tobacco program, for instance, benefitted landowners over and above tenants, sharecroppers, small growers, black farmers, and non-landowning tobacco workers; the federal government and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) successfully worked to create an equitable system for American farmers (Badger, 1980; Benson, 2012; Kingsolver, 2011).

Although most commodity crops transitioned out of their federal price support programs in the 1950s, the tobacco program remained active until 2004. Despite the program's own inherent instabilities, such as the burley program crisis of 1970, key leaders in the tobacco economy worked out these issues in order to sustain the program and to subsequently keep tobacco farmers farming. The program was not perfect, but no system is. It took work and effort, and support from key leaders in influential positions, to keep the program going. When support for the tobacco program eroded at the national level in the 1980s and 1990s, the program began its descent, and farmers at the local level felt these effects. Tobacco prices dropped, quota allotments were reduced, and many farmers in places such as Bethel were forced to quit growing the crop. Without national level support, an initiative as egalitarian as the tobacco program stands little chance of success. Consequently, of the 187 Watauga County tobacco farms that reported raising tobacco in 2002, only 11 remained in 2007, three years after the end of the federal tobacco program (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2007).

The state of organic/sustainable farming in 2012 and the state of tobacco farming in the early years of the twentieth century are remarkably similar. Certainly, tobacco farming in the early twentieth century was more widespread and crucial to rural livelihoods than organic farming is now. But, from a structural standpoint, the two systems have much in common. Like the tobacco economy then, the sustainable agricultural economy today is in its organizational stages (r), whereby it seeks to reach a conservation phase (k) that is resilient and successful long-term. For sustainable agriculture to take that next step toward long-term success, there must be an ongoing dialogue between the national and local levels, and the national level must reach out to local and regional groups, incorporate, adopt, and enhance the initiatives of these groups, and create a system that safeguards the small farmer and provides a more egalitarian marketplace atmosphere.

Unfortunately, though the time is ripe for national level investment in local/regional sustainable agricultural networks and infrastructure, the current national and international neoliberal economic climate stands starkly against any such proposal. On the one hand, this economic climate is the main reason for the downfall of the tobacco program. On the other hand, this climate inhibits the development of a similar movement/program concerning sustainable agriculture. Moreover, today's neoliberal era shares similarities with the tobacco economy during the early twentieth century. Even after the tobacco monopoly, James B. Duke's American Tobacco Company, was broken up by antitrust legislation in 1911, federal support for the tobacco program did not come until two decades later, and still then it did not take permanent effect for essentially eight years, until 1941 (van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). Regardless of national level support, years of contentious work, broad consensus

building, and garnering farmer support were required before the tobacco program became a successful fixture of American agriculture.

What, then, can be done now to work towards creating a similar type of program that fosters the growth and health of small farms and farming communities, especially in the mountains? According to Gaventa & McGee (2010), creating broad alliances, finding key leaders who are sympathetic to the cause, placing leaders in positions of power, and reframing issues to avoid contentiousness are all necessary steps to take to cultivate change. The question as I see it is not whether price supports, marketing quotas, and a federally supported system favoring less concentrated farms would work for organic agriculture in Appalachia. I believe the historical success of the tobacco program shows that that system works. The challenge, as with tobacco in the 1920s and 1930s, is scaling up community-based organizations to the national level and maintaining these gains. Efforts and inroads made by the CFA and ASD towards this goal are encouraging and worth emulating. Still, getting broad national recognition and support for sustainable agriculture has yet to occur. What will it take to get it? The tobacco program emerged out of the New Deal, which emerged in response to the Great Depression. Not to make light of economic failure, but hard economic times can bring about the opportunities for significant change. If the grassroots level is organized and prepared to scale up, they may have the opportunity to determine beneficial policies and laws in this scenario. Nonetheless, organic cooperatives and farmers' groups should continue to build strong community-based initiatives, engage with county and state political levels, and work towards engaging in national level politics. According to Gaventa & McGee (2010), this should include getting leaders elected to office that are from

these organizations or at least sympathetic to their concerns. Concomitantly, finding like-minded and sympathetic key leaders already in positions of power and influence at the national level is crucial. Furthermore, reframing the most contentious issues surrounding the establishment of a stronger organic farming infrastructure is a proven way to find success. After the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the first Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, advocates of the AAA used the strategy of reframing to shift attention from the most contentious issues (i.e., price supports and marketing restrictions) to broader, more palatable goals (i.e., soil conservation) (Badger, 1980; van Willigen & Eastwood, 1998). For the agrarian culture and economy of the mountains to survive going forward, the propositions and steps outlined above must be implemented.

### **Bethel without tobacco**

For small farmers in twenty-first century Appalachia, agrarian livelihoods and ways of life are waning, and this is due to the loss of tobacco farming as an economically viable aspect of multiple livelihood work strategies and due to the end of the tobacco program (Halperin, 1990). Combinations of cattle, tobacco, logging, dairy, off-farm employment, and other work once enabled the continuation of the agrarian economy and culture of Watauga County and Bethel. Now, without tobacco, farming in the mountains is less diversified and less a part of incomes and everyday lives. Moreover, the other aspects of these former multiple livelihood strategies have ended or been curtailed by economic changes brought on by neoliberalism. The dairy industry has consolidated and forced out small farmers, logging has slowed since nearby furniture factories have moved overseas, and off-farm employment has been harder to come by since the recession of 2008.



Ironically, because of these economic factors and the 2008 recession, some former tobacco farmers in Bethel have recently thought about raising tobacco again (personal communication, Tommy Lawrence, 2011). They have the skills, the land, the equipment, and so forth, and could use the supplemental income tobacco once brought. Yet, a direct tobacco company-to-farmer contract, which is the *de facto* method of selling tobacco today, is hard to come by, and moreover, the future possibilities of tobacco companies and manufacturers working with small farmers are doubtful. Since the 1980s, tobacco companies and tobacco state politicians have worked to undermine the U.S. tobacco farming economy in order to maximize the profits of the tobacco industry (Benson, 2012). With the establishment of foreign leaf markets and the calculated erosion of the tobacco program, the tobacco industry pushed for direct contracts with farmers in the early 2000s, an attractive alternative to warehouse auctions at that time (personal communication, Shelby Eggers, 2012; Benson, 2012). However, when the program ended in 2004, the price of burley tobacco dropped precipitously, tobacco production immediately consolidated, and tobacco companies gained more control over tobacco production. Most small or part-time tobacco farmers, even if they wanted to, could no longer raise tobacco and hope to be profitable.

The end of the program came at a time when farming in the mountains was on its last leg. Hundreds of farmers quit raising tobacco from the 1970s to the 2000s in Watauga County (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1969 and 2007). And of those farmers remaining, many were at or near retirement age in the years leading up to the buyout. For them, the end of the program came at a time when they could transition to retirement. Many others, who were raising tobacco part-time or on the side, transitioned to full-time, off-farm work.

Consequently, the agrarian culture and economy of Watauga County, and Bethel, where much of the county's tobacco production was concentrated, declined steeply in the twenty-first century. But, the fact that this economy and culture was there at all in 2004 speaks to the success and egalitarian nature of the tobacco program. The program allowed for the continuation of small farming as a part-time livelihood and full-time way of life in the mountains well past the years when other farming communities across the country, such as those in the Midwest, had met the full force of the free market.

#### **A new "old" way**

The tobacco culture and economy of the mountains is gone and likely will not return. And, with regard to both the culture and economy of the mountains, that is a sad thing. Social and community connections that once revolved around tobacco farming have changed and been lost. Pride in work and pride in community have changed, as well. Moving forward, once-deeply agrarian communities such as Bethel face difficult economic and cultural choices. Most former tobacco farmers are now fully integrated in to the market economy. They work away from home and the community and are less dependent on the social and economic connections that historically characterized Bethel. Although raising cattle can still be a profitable farming venture, the overall agrarian economy and culture of Bethel is diminishing.

For small farming to once again foster livelihoods and ways of life in the mountains, in all likelihood through sustainable agricultural strategies, the tobacco program and the twentieth century tobacco economy, with its strengths and weaknesses, must be studied and taken into account. Moreover, many of the traditional techniques and practices that

characterized how tobacco was once grown, the “all hands work” of the early years, such as hoeing, suckering by hand (instead of spraying), raising plants from seed, using draft animals to plow and cultivate, and relying on family, friends, and neighbors for reciprocal exchange, among other things, are adaptable to the emerging culture and economy of sustainable agriculture. There are commonalities between these two systems. To take a shot at reframing an issue, maybe the conversation regarding the end of tobacco farming and the start of sustainable agriculture in Appalachia should concern “doing things more the old way.” Bethel’s history is rooted in the old way, and many Bethel farmers remember and can still utilize these traditional practices, such as using draft animals, a technique prized by many burgeoning and beginning organic farmers. Finding and illuminating these connections is critical for both the preservation of traditional agrarian communities, such as Bethel, and for the emergence of a culture and economy of sustainable agriculture. Perhaps a renewed agrarian culture and economy is just around the corner.

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APPENDIX A. BETHEL IN PHOTOGRAPH



PHOTO 1. A young burley tobacco crop and corn field, Bethel, Shelby Eggers' farm.

(All photographs, with one exception, were taken at Shelby Eggers' farm in Bethel, by the author).



PHOTO 2. A young burley plant.



PHOTO 3. Shelby Eggers' tobacco patch and barn.





PHOTO 4. Shelby Eggers' tobacco patch and corn field, late summer 2011.



PHOTO 5. Down the row.



PHOTO 6. The beginning of the tobacco harvest, Tommy Lawrence's tobacco field.



PHOTO 7. Cutting tobacco at Shelby Eggers' farm, September 2011.

In 2011, Mr. Eggers hired a Hispanic work crew from a nearby county to cut and hang his tobacco. This patch and another slightly larger field, roughly two acres of tobacco in total, were cut in one day. About a week later, after the tobacco cured down in the field, the crew came back to hang the tobacco.



PHOTOS 8 & 9. Laying out sticks, cutting tobacco plants, and spearing plants.





PHOTOS 10 & 11. A tobacco spear (above, PHOTO 10), and speared tobacco hanging in the barn (below, PHOTO 11).





PHOTO 12. Freshly cut and speared tobacco.

PHOTO 12 is an example of the traditional way Bethel farmers cut, speared, and staked tobacco in the field. Bethel farmers drove/hammered the sticks into the ground and then speared six plants onto the stick. Each stick stood individually as the tobacco cured down in the field prior to hanging. As part of my fieldwork research, I helped Shelby Eggers cut and spear some of his tobacco. All of the photographs with hammered sticks, such as the above photograph, were done by Mr. Eggers and me.



PHOTO 13. Tobacco sticks, the migrant worker way.

The tobacco sticks in this picture have been cut and staked by the Hispanic workers hired by Shelby Eggers. Whereas Bethel farmers hammer the sticks into the ground, the migrant workers lean two sticks, each with six stalks of tobacco, against each other, as one stick provides balance for the other. Also, note the color difference in the tobacco: the leaves have cured down in the field, turning more yellow, and are ready for hanging in the barn.



PHOTOS 14 & 15. Tobacco curing in the field.







PHOTO 16. Loading tobacco onto the trail.

(As a side note, neither Shelby nor the migrant workers who spoke some English knew why one worker [pictured above] wore an old shirt around his head. He could have been going to great lengths to protect against nicotine poisoning [from handling too much tobacco] or green tobacco sickness [from handling wet tobacco], but considering the relatively small amount of tobacco worked, and the fact that the tobacco was dry, the chances of encountering these problems were unlikely. Perhaps he just took extra precaution or simply wanted to keep dust and dirt from the field and barn out of his face.)



PHOTOS 17 & 18. Loading tobacco onto the trailer.





PHOTO 19. With the trailer backed into the barn, the tobacco is ready to unload and hang.



PHOTO 20. Unloading and handing up tobacco sticks (Shelby Eggers, left).



PHOTO 21. Hanging tobacco on the second tier.

Although it's hard to tell, this worker is standing on the second tier of the tobacco barn, eight or nine feet off the ground. He's bending over to grab the stick of tobacco as it is being handed up to him. He'll take this tobacco stick and hang it on the rafters above his head.



PHOTO 22. Hanging tobacco on the second tier.



PHOTO 23. An unloaded trailer (Shelby Eggers, right).



PHOTO 24. Tobacco curing in the barn.





PHOTO 25. Tobacco curing in the barn.

## VITA

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