

Tobacco Blues: A Review

John Fraser Hart

Department of Geography, University of Minnesota

American tobacco farmers have felt increasingly beleaguered ever since 1966, when the Surgeon General first announced that cigarette smoking might be bad for you. Since then attacking tobacco has become high fashion politically and socially, and a veritable bloodlust has seized critics of smoking, who have mercilessly castigated anything and everything that has to do with tobacco.

Tobacco farmers have been made to feel defensive about growing a perfectly legal crop for which they have no even remotely acceptable alternative, and they protest that they have suffered unfairly for the ruthless and deceptive practices of the cigarette manufacturing companies. Ironically, the farmers have better reason for hating the cigarette companies than almost anyone else, because the companies determine the price the farmers receive for the crop that is their principal source of income.

"Tobacco Blues,"¹ is an attempt to document the attitudes and feeling of tobacco farmers under stress. The authors have focused on a quartet of farmers in Kentucky who are correctly balanced racially, although one must wonder how representative they are. What proportion of Kentucky tobacco farmers are black? How many wives of black Kentucky tobacco farmers have testified before Congressional committees? How many small tobacco farmers in Kentucky are into organic farming and sustainable agriculture?

The authors seem more interested in affective pictorial quality than in substance. They have some nice footage of transplanting, topping, cutting, spearing, hanging, and stripping tobacco, and of an auction in a sales warehouse, but they seem startlingly uncurious about what people are doing and why they are doing it. They have squandered a fine educational opportunity to make a good documentary about the people who grow tobacco and how they grow it. Perhaps that was not their objective, but if not, what was? They communicate no clear sense of purpose.

It is unfortunate indeed that they did not seek advice from someone who knows something about geography and about tobacco. They seem blissfully unaware that their tape is highly placebound to Burley tobacco and to the Bluegrass area of Kentucky, which they fail to mention. Few farmers in North Carolina, for example, are familiar with cutting, spearing, hanging, and stripping tobacco, and they might well wonder if sucker leaves fall off all by themselves in Kentucky.

This film might be good television, but it is poor geography. It is the kind of thing that you might watch once on public television and promptly forget, but it is so lacking in substance that one would not wish to sit through it a second time, and it would be a waste of time in the classroom.

¹ A Café Sisters Production, 1997, Lexington, Kentucky: Erin McGinnis, 218 West Bell Court, 40508.