COLEMAN BENNETT YEATTS & NEIGHBORS SHARING CUTTING WOOD FOR SUMMER'S TOBACCO CURING

S. Dail Yeatts



Neighbors join together for "Cuttings" on the Coleman Bennett Yeatts' farm. L/R, Kneeling: Richard Yeatts, Coleman Bennett Yeatts, Letcher Elliott, Walter "Shack" Mills Standing: Dodd Shelton, Dave Yeatts, Hopkins Thomas, Charlie Elliott, Will Dixon, Willie Elliott, Robert Mills and William Elliott.

Cutting wood for the farm and home was a labor and time demanding obligation year after year. Labor was often shared when harvest time pushed farmers to save their crops that required extra help. Wheat threshing, tobacco harvesting, corn shucking, and woodcutting were the main shared events in Dry Fork, Virginia that involved cooperating neighboring farmers and friends.

Tobacco was cured by burning wood to heat the barns where it was placed as it was taken from the fields to be cured. Curing tobacco was a step in the process of preparing the golden leaf for the market to be sold to the highest bidder. During the winter months wood was cut as early as possible to give the wood time to dry for the summer's curing process.

Note the coats on some of the people in the picture. It indicates that the weather was cold but not cold enough to wear a coat if they were using an axe to cut the wood which required a lot of physical activity. The men who had axes in their hands were without their coats. Also, there was a jug of moonshine that Bennett Yeatts had on his leg to keep their bodies warm if the work was not sufficient to do the job.

Bennett Yeatts, my grandfather, lived on a farm near the Dry Fork Road. He moved there in 1897 and died at his home in 1907. The year of this picture was about 1905. Bennett was 57 years old. His sons, Dave age 25 and Richard age17 were participants in the shared work on their farm.

The other members of the group were neighboring farmers. They are left to right including the Yeatts, Richard Yeatts, Bennett Yeatts, Letcher Elliott, and Walter "Shack" Mills. Standing: Dodd Shelton, Dave Yeatts, Hopkins "Hop" Thomas, Charlie Elliott, Will Dixon, Willie Elliott, Robert Mills, and William Elliott, a brother of Charlie.

Trees were cut and prepared to be stacked until summer to provide time for them to dry. Dry wood was necessary in the curing process so it would burn freely. Tobacco curing required close attention in order to see that, different levels of heat were applied at the appropriate time for proper curing. Curing a barn of tobacco lasted about five days. Farmers spent days and nights at their barns while tending to the fire. It was called flue cured tobacco due to the configuration of the tin pipes in the log barns called flues. They distributed the heat from the fire boxes where the wood was placed for burning.

Curing tobacco has changed from the log built barn and the use of wood for heat to a purchased metal curing room. Fuel oil or bottled gas for heat is used that is controlled by a preset thermostat. Now, farmers spend a minimum amount of time overseeing the curing process which makes curing less challenging.

The community people who lived prior to the 1950's remember families gathering at neighborhood curing barns at night to visit. Children played, adults talked, while the musically inclined often made music and sang country and western songs for entertainment. The aroma of burning wood and the old log barns have faded from the tobacco farms in Southside Virginia. Meeting in the cool of the evening with family and friends at a local farmer's tobacco barn now only dwells in the memory of people who are fading from America's scene.