

## CHAPTER 7

### SAVING SHADE—OR REPLACING IT

A Gadsden County Chamber of Commerce brochure published in the 1950s disclosed the county's vulnerability to a downturn in shade tobacco production. The publication listed the county's major agricultural products and underscored, even then, the farmers' willingness to diversify beyond the primary crop:

Shade tobacco	3,500,000 lbs.
Flue tobacco	350,000 lbs.
Beef cattle	9,000 head
Dairy cattle	2,000 head
Swine	12,000 head
Tung nuts	500,000 lbs.
Pecans	100,000 lbs. <sup>1</sup>

The nature of farming requires farmers to be alert to alternate crop possibilities. Dependence on a single crop is risky. Pests or pestilence can infest a crop, damaging it or destroying it entirely. Technology can make a crop obsolete, as in the case of naval stores, tung oil, and many others. New production regions can render a crop non-competitive as in the case of cotton, oranges—and, as it turned out, shade tobacco. It is common, therefore, for farmers, acting alone or in concert, to assiduously seek new crop options. Shade tobacco growers felt the imperative. As early as 1903, A. Cohn and Company attempted diversification when the company planted a large acreage in sugar cane on their Amsterdam, Georgia property. Cohn then bought a small sugar refinery in Louisiana and erected it at Amsterdam, intending to produce “New Orleans Standard Granulated Sugar.” The experiment failed in the first season.<sup>2</sup>

When shade tobacco died in the Georgia-Florida shade tobacco district, it shared the fate of other crops that had once flourished in the region, then died. Through the years there have been several attempts at viniculture. One Leon County grape growing

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<sup>1</sup> Gadsden County Chamber of Commerce, “Inventory of Industrial Advantages – Quincy, Florida,” undated—probably 1953. Copy in the Florida Archives, Tallahassee.

<sup>2</sup> Frank S. Jones, *History of Decatur County* (Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Reprint Company, 1980), 331.

and winemaking venture began around 1900. It was abandoned after the county embraced prohibition in 1904. Wine grapes and table grapes are apparently not suited for the local climate.<sup>3</sup> The exception is scuppernongs, which are native to the area and adapt readily to cultivation. However, ripe scuppernongs are expensive to produce because they are picked one by one, not in bunches, as is the case with conventional grapes. Further, to generations of consumers raised on Thompson seedless grapes and now on red seedless grapes as well, the big-seeded, funny-tasting scuppernongs are not very appealing. For whatever reason, scuppernongs have not replaced shade tobacco as a dominant regional crop.<sup>4</sup>

Tung nuts are another example of a crop that has disappeared. Some farmers in the shade tobacco counties planted tung trees, which are native to China, and harvested the nuts for processing into oil used by the paint and varnish industry. First planted in 1906 from specimens provided by the United States Department of Agriculture, production continued into the 1960s, encouraged by an increase in demand when the Communist victory in China cut off that country as a source. With the development of advanced hydrocarbon products in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, tung oil was rendered partially obsolete and farmers abandoned or chopped down their tung tree orchards.<sup>5</sup>

Turpentine, or more properly, naval stores, was an important industry in the area during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There again, synthetic products derived from hydrocarbons, especially petroleum, proved to be cheaper to produce and provided broader ranges of physical and chemical properties. Before 1960, the naval stores industry had largely disappeared from the Georgia-Florida region, and indeed, throughout most of the South.<sup>6</sup>

Cotton, once the most important crop in the South and second only to tobacco in the shade tobacco district, disappeared locally during the period when it vanished from

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<sup>3</sup> Clifton Paisley, *From Cotton to Quail: An Agricultural Chronicle of Leon County, Florida 1860-1967* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1968) 49-51.

<sup>4</sup> Clara Jane Smith, interview by author, Bainbridge, Georgia, 18 October 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Paisley, *Cotton to Quail*, 119-120.

<sup>6</sup> Tommy Wheeler, interview by author, Bainbridge, Georgia, 2 July 2002; Mayo Livingston, interview by author, Bainbridge, Georgia, 7 March 2002. For more on the naval stores industry, see Robert Outland, "Another New South: Patterns of Continuity in the Southern Naval Stores Industry" (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1999).

much of the Deep South. Cotton was victim of the boll weevil, and at the same time victim of more efficient production in such newer producing regions as Texas and California.<sup>7</sup>

Shade tobacco farmers were aware of their peril. So were the various support agencies and institutions including the USDA, state agriculture departments and university agriculture schools. All contributed to the efforts to save shade tobacco and to find alternate crops, efforts that became more critical as the future of shade tobacco became more doubtful.

A “farmer-inventor” designed and built a radically different barn intended to revolutionize the curing process. The “Solaranza” barn, as he called it, was only one-third the size of a typical shade tobacco barn; it used solar heat instead of propane stoves. The inventor claimed it would save nearly 90 percent of the fuel cost necessary for curing. There were additional advantages. The cure took nineteen days instead of twenty-eight, the barn could be built for one-fourth less than a conventional barn, and it offered significant savings in the amount of labor required to load and unload the tobacco. The inventor was unable to interest a single farmer in trying out his creation.<sup>8</sup>

Further diversification in tobacco was a possibility. Shade growers might not want to battle for share of market in cigarette tobacco, but other specialty tobaccos might hold promise of success. During the 1960s shade growers became interested in growing *candela* cigar wrapper, a premium wrapper with an attractive green color. Candela is conventional wrapper tobacco cured in special barns and with higher temperatures than is the case with ordinary wrapper. Formerly supplied by Cuba, the American embargo shut off the island nation as the source of the product. Perhaps twenty-five expatriate Cuban cigar experts helped opportunistic Florida growers scramble to fill the void in supply. At first, candela culture was promising: the 1964 crop totaled 750 acres and yielded 50 percent higher profits than conventional shade tobacco. But the green leaf proved not to

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<sup>7</sup> Tommy Wheeler, interview by author, Bainbridge, Georgia, 2 July 2002. Wheeler continues the story of cotton, explaining that the USDA recognized the seriousness of the boll weevil problem and, after years of effort, developed a regimen for controlling the pest. The crop has returned to many parts of the Deep South where it had been abandoned; in some South Georgia counties it is now the leading crop, both in acres planted and income generated.

<sup>8</sup> “C. A. Brinks Uses Florida Sun In Tobacco Curing Process,” *The Chattahoochee Tribune*, vol. 59, no. 26, 25 June 1959, 1.

be a panacea. When shade tobacco production moved offshore, candela moved with it.<sup>9</sup> “Turkish” tobaccos, aromatic varieties blended into cigarette and pipe mixtures, did not prove successful in the area. Demand is not large compared with the demand for other types of tobacco, so existing sources were adequate to supply the market.<sup>10</sup>

American Sumatra Tobacco Corporation had the most to lose as changes occurred in shade tobacco supply and demand. The company was resourceful in its explorations of other crop possibilities. In Connecticut, in 1955, AST set up a new subsidiary company, Imperial Nurseries, to grow domestic plants—plants and trees used in landscaping. The New England operations successfully served the continuing postwar housing boom in the metropolitan northeastern corridor of the country. By 1964, the original test site of two acres had grown to 600 acres. Florida nursery plant operations, initiated in 1957, were entirely containerized—plants were grown in the containers in which they would later be shipped and sold. This new growing technique provided labor-saving advantages over the conventional method, which required digging up each individual plant or tree and putting it in a pot or wrapping it in a burlap bag.<sup>11</sup>

Vegetables offered much promise. Truck farming is similar in many ways to growing shade tobacco. Both involve irrigation systems, intensive cultivation, and relatively small plots. In 1954, construction of a 12,800 sq. ft. farmers market was completed three miles west of Quincy. The following year growers reported nearly 400 acres planted in fall vegetables. In 1960, another vegetable growers meeting added up the acreage of three crops and reported 250 acres of tomatoes, 50 acres of cantaloupes, and 25 acres of potatoes under cultivation.<sup>12</sup> 1966, the Quincy Farmers Mart building had grown to 28,800 sq. ft., the size of a large supermarket. The Mart trumpeted “the largest peach crop in history” and offered spring and fall crops of pole beans, bunch beans, squash and peas, plus special fall crops of bell peppers, eggplant and cucumbers.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Gadsden County Candela Leaf Is Equal In Quality To Original Cuban Tobacco.” *Tallahassee Democrat*, 6 September 1964, 3; Zabawa, “Macro-Micro Linkages,” 371; Mary Frances Donalson, “If Cuba Does It, Georgia Does it Better,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 4 July 1963, 43; Pete Miller, interview by author, Attapulgus, Georgia, 18 June 2003.

<sup>10</sup> *Gadsden County Times*, vol. 55, no. 26, 30 June 1955, 1.

<sup>11</sup> John Sparmann, telephone interview by author, 27 January 2003.

<sup>12</sup> *Gadsden County Times*, vol. 60, no. 30, 28 July 1960, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Tommy Edwards, “An Idea Grows Up—Quincy Farmers Mart,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, 10 July 1966, 3D.

Some concepts were more fanciful, including the initiative of several tobacco farmers who in 1948 decided to grow fish. Not catfish—bass and bream. The ponds for aquaculture were already in place in the form of natural and man-made reservoirs used for irrigating the tobacco. All that was necessary was to throw in the fingerlings, feed them, and eventually, bring them to harvest. The ventures apparently failed very quickly: there is no further record of bass or bream cultivation in the county.<sup>14</sup>

### **Deciding to Change**

As the demise of shade tobacco production became inevitable, Florida growers had to make some decisions. First was whether or not to continue farming. Some farm families retired from farming and supported themselves with non-farming employment, or else lived on savings. Many who ceased farm operations planted their farms in pine trees, banking value for the next generation. Although most shade farmers also had cattle operations, these were only adjuncts to the production of tobacco. Most farmers quickly liquidated their herds. Some land was close enough to Tallahassee to be attractive for residential development. The Havana Country Club and the Country Club Estates subdivision, both on the north side of Havana, were built on land that formerly belonged to AST. Quincy Farms, the large mushroom production company southwest of Quincy, was developed on what once was a tobacco field. Quincy's industrial park stands on another former tobacco farm.<sup>15</sup> The mushroom operation is significant. The initial building was 190,000 sq. ft.—larger than a Super Wal-Mart store. One of the largest mushroom production facilities in the world, the \$10 million structure is air-conditioned and computer operated.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these imaginative ventures, most shade tobacco farmers stayed with farming. Two crops have emerged as the primary replacements for the weed, especially when measured in terms of farm income. Both crops require good soil and good irrigation systems. Both are labor intensive and management intensive. There are eight large plant nursery operations in Gadsden County and one in Decatur County; combined annual sales of these operations is more than \$80 million. Two nurseries are part of large

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<sup>14</sup> Ben L. Kerce, "Man-Made 'Fish Farms' Assure Bass and Bream—and Irrigation." *Jackson County Floridian*, 9 January 1948.

<sup>15</sup> Susan DeFord, "Mushrooms, flowers herald town's new era," Tallahassee *Democrat*, 22 June 1981, 1-2B

<sup>16</sup> Sylvan, Inc., [www.sylvaninc.com/index.shtml](http://www.sylvaninc.com/index.shtml), 1 October 2003. Sylvan, the corporate parent of Quincy Farms, calls itself the world's leading supplier of spawn—"mushroom seed."

corporate structures. Six families who formerly grew shade tobacco own the other nurseries, growing trees and flowers where they once grew cigar wrapper. In the period immediately after shade production ceased, nursery workers included many former shade tobacco workers. The new jobs were better, however, because they were year-round jobs, not seasonal work. In the case of Imperial Nursery workers, not only were the jobs full-time jobs, but also for the first time workers were paid the minimum wage rate, and they received such employment benefits as health insurance and paid vacations.<sup>17</sup>

Tomatoes are the other major crop. There are two seasons per year—“windows” between the times when major tomato-growing areas in South Florida and North Carolina are in production. The Georgia-Florida region grows “greens” and “pinks,” and has in recent years added new varieties: Romas, grapes, pears, cherries, and uglies. The first large-scale tomato crop was grown in 1976; all fourteen Gadsden County farmers who grew the initial crop were former shade producers.<sup>18</sup> Today, annual farm income generated by tomatoes totals \$50 to \$60 million.<sup>19</sup>

The labor situation was not at all like the situation in nursery operations. Tomatoes are a seasonal crop. A large field requires scores of workers to set out the young plants, erect the stakes, and lay down the plastic sheeting used for weed control. The workers are not again needed until harvest; tomatoes are picked entirely by hand and once again, a large field requires scores of workers. From the start, unlike the situation in nursery operations, African American workers were not employed for this work. They were not interested in returning to the hot, hard toil required for stoop labor jobs, and they wanted full-time jobs. Further, many had moved after the tobacco plantations ceased operating. Some moved into town—Quincy, Bainbridge, Tallahassee, Havana, Greensboro, Gretna—others left the region entirely. Most tomato processors already had production in Central and South Florida where Latin-American migrant workers provided the necessary seasonal labor input. Migrants were recruited, transported, and supervised

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<sup>17</sup> John Sparmann, telephone interview by author, 27 January 2003. Henry Grant, telephone interview by author, 20 October 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Zabawa and Christina Gladwin, “Using anthropological tools to understand Florida’s farming systems and the survival of Florida’s small farmers,” *Florida Journal of Anthropology* 8 (1983): 56.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Grant, telephone interview by author, 20 October 2003.

by labor contractors. The processors simply asked their existing labor contractors to add the new production area to their responsibilities.<sup>20</sup>

Decatur County farm products are more diverse than those in Gadsden County. In addition to tomatoes, a crop that totals more than \$90 million per year in farm income, Decatur farmers grow cotton valued at \$24 million per year and peanuts valued at \$20 million per year. Poultry production adds approximately \$22 million annually. In 2001, the most recent year for which Georgia farm statistics are available, the average farm income in Decatur County came to \$581,000. Although Florida agricultural statistics do not include average farm income, the Gadsden County extension agent judges that average farm income for his county is greater than that in Decatur County, based on the relatively low number of small farms in Gadsden County.<sup>21</sup>

County extension agents in both Gadsden and Decatur Counties now judge that current farm income, after adjusting for inflation, roughly approximates farm income before the demise of shade tobacco production. There are fewer farmers now, and they are, on average, larger than during the heyday of shade tobacco. The better operators not only survived, they prospered. Most farm workers did not continue as farm workers, at least partly of their own choice. The exception is in the nurseries, where year-round employment is available to former shade tobacco workers, and their children. In tomatoes, migrant labor is the rule. In the case of the other crops, there is no labor force required—production is mechanized.<sup>22</sup>

Farmers, aided by county extension agents, tried valiantly over a period of years to save shade tobacco—to work out a reason for cigar makers to continue to rely on Florida production. All efforts failed, so most larger farmers turned to alternative agricultural products and to horticulture. In these endeavors they have been successful—for the most part, more successful than ever. The outcome for workers was different, but in its own way successful, as discussed in the conclusion.

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<sup>20</sup> Sylvester Woodward, interview by author, Gadsden County, Florida, 5 February 2003. Henry Grant, interview by author, 20 October 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell May, interview by author, 17 October 2003.

<sup>22</sup> May, interview. Grant, interview.