# Tobacco culture: What Kentucky agriculture has lost along the way

BY LIAM NIEMEYER
KENTUCKY LANTERN

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**Clark County farmer Kenneth Anderson has been around tobacco his entire 69 years and feels the impact of societal and agriculture change.**

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**Workers stand on rails amid rafters in the tobacco barn and plants are passed by hand to be hung inside the barn to cure.**

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**Kenneth Anderson sorts through tobacco inside one of this barns on his Clark County farm.**

Kenneth Anderson's father taught him what to look for in high-quality tobacco, cured for weeks in the rafters of a Clark County barn. How to "grade" or rate the quality of the different parts of the plant, looking for slight variations of the deep brown color of the dried leaves.

"Tobacco's always been a crop that you survived on," Anderson said as he drove his truck over the rolling hills of his land on an early September morning. "Tobacco paid the bills. It paid for the farm. It sent kids to school."

Growing the cash crop is a part of a family tradition that's stretched across four generations for Anderson. He first rode a tractor when he was six years old. By the age of 14, he was high in the tobacco barn rafters himself as he placed plants along tobacco sticks to be cured in the fall.

In high school, he'd go on to win ribbons in county and regional tobacco competitions through Future Farmers of America. Just this year, he won several tobacco contests at the state fair.

Growing up was a time when "every farm had a small acre, small acres" of tobacco, Anderson said. In 1978, a few years after he graduated from high school, more than 700 of the 962 farms in Clark County grew the crop, according to federal data.

It was a product — dark tobacco traditionally grown in Western Kentucky and burley tobacco grown elsewhere — that dominated the state's farm economy, bringing in on average about a quarter of approximately $3.4 billion in annual revenue for Kentucky farms each year during the 1990s.

Anderson, now 69, also believes change is inevitable. That change has been dramatic over the roughly two decades for the crop he's grown to know so well. Nearly 60,000 farms grew tobacco in the 1990s to now less than 1,000 as of 2022, according to federal agriculture census data.

By his estimate now, there's less than 10 tobacco growers left in Clark County.

"I didn't foresee it, the changes that have happened," Anderson said in his soft-spoken voice. "I've always heard it said, 'You may not want to be the first to change, but you don't want to be the last.'"

Anderson pulled up in his truck next to a tobacco barn, where one of the last few tobacco growers in his county was having migrant workers from Mexico hang the plants in the rafters. Anderson doesn't grow the crop anymore, but he leases his land to 45-year-old Jeremy Jones, who grows it on contract for a tobacco company.

The laborers, hired as seasonal labor through H-2A visas, worked to music as they lifted themselves on the beams high in the barn to do the labor of "housing" the tobacco. Over several weeks, the air will cure the tobacco, draining moisture from the plant's stems and wrinkling the leaf into a dark tan.

"You see it from start to finish. You've touched it. You've done it. You know, it's a sense of pride in the end to know that you've started it and completed it, and that's what you do to make your living," said Jones, standing inside the barn.

For the farmers who still grow it, there's a feeling of accomplishment with raising the labor-intensive crop from a seed as small as a "pinhead."

But even as Kentucky agriculture has moved beyond reliance on the crop, some of those farmers also wonder what's been lost — community, culture and learned practices and knowledge hanged down by generations — as the number of tobacco farmers continues to dwindle in the state.

University of Kentucky agriculture economist Will Snell points to multiple reasons for the dramatic decline of Kentucky tobacco.

Rates of smoking and tobacco consumption across the country have fallen drastically over the decades, driving down demand for domestic tobacco. The falling rates coincide with nationwide efforts to discourage smoking and tobacco consumption, cited by the American Lung Association as a driving reason why Kentucky remains among the top states for new cases of lung cancer.

Newer products with nicotine — vapes, nicotine pouches — generally use little to no nicotine from Kentucky tobacco.

That trend of falling demand, along with competition of cheaper tobacco grown overseas, led Congress in 2004 to end the federal price support program for tobacco farmers that had been in place since the Great Depression. The program controlled how much tobacco each farmer could grow in an effort to manage the supply and selling price of the cash crop. Farmers received more than $9 billion in buyout payments when the program ended; Kentucky received about $2.5 billion in payments.

Snell, who was working at the University of Kentucky at the time of the buyout, calls the roughly 20 years since the buyout in Kentucky agriculture to be the largest "structural change of any ag economy of any state."

"We've lost about 80% of the market, maybe 90% of the growers," Snell said about Kentucky tobacco. He compared it to if Illinois lost 80% of their corn production, or if Wisconsin lost 80% of their dairy production.

"How in the world would they survive?" Snell said.

Overall, Snell said Kentucky agriculture economy has been able to largely rebound from a past reliance on tobacco.

In the 1990s, according to federal data compiled by Snell, Kentucky's farm economy averaged about $3.4 billion in annual revenue, with tobacco making up about 25% of the revenue. Tobacco now accounts for only a little more than 2% of revenue in 2025, according to a University of Kentucky

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