

V.F. The American Snuff Co. (H)

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A G E D I N W O O D

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Activities and Operation  
at  
THE AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY  
in  
Hopkinsville, Kentucky  
in the 1920's  
by  
George Minor Rogers

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(Original copy sent to the Conwood Corporation Museum  
in Memphis, Tennessee )

F I F T Y    Y E A R S    A G O

at the  
**American Snuff Company**  
as told by

George M. Rogers

who began his career as a tobacconist January 1925 at the Hopkinsville Branch of the American Snuff Company, and who later became a buyer on the Hopkinsville Market for the Company and then a buyer and manager of the Mayfield Branch.

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Dark Tobacco As King

Fifty years ago dark tobacco was the main cash crop, if not the only one, of the farmers in the dark tobacco belt. The main counties in this belt were Christian, Todd, Trigg, Caldwell, Lyon, Livingston, Calloway, Hopkins, Davis, Henderson, Calloway, and Graves in Kentucky; and Stewart, Montgomery, and Robertson in Tennessee. Several other counties raised small amounts of dark tobacco also.

Burley tobacco was not grown in this area then and it did not look or smell like tobacco to the dark tobacco farmer. It was only with reluctance that the farmers turned to growing burley as the result of the good prices it brought and the fact that it did not require firing to cure.

Firing dark tobacco required strenuous labor to gather the necessary wood and to keep a twenty-four hour vigil for several weeks. A person who has never fired a barn

of dark tobacco can't know what smoke can do to one's eyes, or the fatigue caused by lifting logs to keep the fires going- to say nothing of the loss of sleep and the suspense caused by fear of fire. If a stick was improperly placed in the barn and fell it could start a fire which would not only destroy a whole year's earnings but also the barn. But firing was necessary in order to give the tobacco the proper finish so that the tobacco met the specifications of the tobacco industry. At that time there were no restrictions on the number of acres or poundage a farmer could raise. Every farm had one or more dark tobacco barns, depending upon the size of the farm. In the early fall a haze of smoke from the many tobacco barns lay over the countryside and the aroma of curing tobacco filled the air.

As the result of the importance of dark tobacco the economic structure of the community depended upon it and revolved around it. Consequently the tobacco companies held a place of great importance in the community. THE AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY, now CONWOOD CORPORATION, was one of these companies. The Hopkinsville Branch was located on Twenty-first Street.

#### Job Opportunities at the AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY

Fifty years ago the Hopkinsville Branch of the AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY employed between seventy-five and one hundred people at the peak of the season. In a town the size of Hopkinsville at that time, this gave quite a

boost to the economy. Both black and white people were employed, with perhaps more blacks. A few of both races were eventually employed on a permanent basis and stayed with the Company until retirement. However, only few ever rose to the position of buyer because very few buyers were needed and also because it took a lot of persistence for a young person to stay with the work long enough to reach that position. It took years of apprenticeship to reach that position, and the work was seasonal during most of this training. Therefore, the young person had to find parttime work elsewhere during five or six months of the year, and this wasn't easy, especially then. Farming and carpentry were the types of work a tobacco apprentice was most likely to find. The farming especially fitted him for future buying.

The top position anyone could ever hope to attain at a local level was that of manager or assistant manager. These positions were also usually filled by persons who had come through the apprenticeship training.

So a young man considered himself fortunate at that time to be able to start with a tobacco company, especially the AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY, hoping eventually to climb to the position of buyer, if not higher. This was thought of as being as important as going to college is today.

### The Classer's Job

When a young man went to work at the AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY the first job he held was that of classer on the classing line. This was where he learned the different grades of tobacco the Company needed by learning to sort the hands of tobacco according to the grades. This was important if he ever hoped to become a buyer, for a buyer had to make instant decisions on grades—decisions in which he spent thousands of dollars of the Company's money and poor decisions could mean heavy losses for the Company.

In 1925 a classer was paid 25¢ an hour and worked from 7:00 A.M. until 5:30 P.M. with half an hour off for lunch. He often worked six days a week during the rush part of the season. He stood on his feet at the classing tables during his work hours. This job was always on a seasonal basis but the seasons were longer than today. They usually ran from around the first of December to the first of May.

### The Receiver's Job

After a young man had mastered the classing line, as soon as there was an opening, he was advanced to receiver. There was one designated receiver at the Hopkinsville Branch, although all the people above him had the ability to receive because they had also gone through the line, so to speak.

In this job the receiver received the tobacco the company buyers had bought at the barn and at the loose-leaf floors. There were two receiving entrances at the Hopkinsville plant. Tobacco bought in the country at the barns was brought by wagon to the SNUFF COMPANY and received at the west entrance of the Hopkinsville plant. During the tobacco season it was not unusual to see wagons lined up on both sides of Twenty-First Street waiting to be unloaded. The farmers often waited in the Company office where they talked and swapped yarns.

While receiving the tobacco the receiver had to decide whether it should go to the classing line or directly to the prizing room to be put in hogsheads. The farmer delivered the tobacco classified according to leaf, seconds, and lugs. The receiver had to determine its classification according to company grades. If the leaf was of consistent quality and met the top company grade it would be sent to the prize room. This applied to any other unmixed grade the farmer's crop met. If, however, it was of mixed quality and included two or more of the Company grades it was sent to the classing tables for reclassification. However, there were times when there was so much tobacco on hand it had to be sent to the storage room to wait for processing.

#### American Snuff Grades

The AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY grades were as follows:

A - Top Grade

B - Next Best

C - Average

L - Lugs

D - Trash or low class lugs

### Buying in the Country

There were no government grades or graders forty or fifty years ago. The company buyers rode over the counties in the tobacco belt and bought tobacco directly from the farmers at the barn. This eliminated the farmers paying for the loose-leaf selling cost. The buyer made the farmer a price which he thought was in line with the Company economics and policy for that year. The farmer had to decide whether he felt it was a good price or whether he had rather take the crop to the loose-leaf floor, pay the cost of selling, hoping it would bring more.

Country buying was a rough job, but interesting for one who knew farming and liked farmers, as did some of the Company buyers. It came at the time of year when the weather was often bad and there were few good roads, certainly not to the barns. A buyer had to learn how to drive on icy roads and in mud.

The country buyer bought tobacco at the barn on the basis of the type of tobacco raised. There were three main types:

Leaf-the best

Seconds

Lugs

However, there were sometimes several types of leaf as green leaf and/or short leaf. The lugs were sometimes spoken of as lugs and trash, with the trash being the very poorest type of tobacco, and of course bringing the lowest price.

The buyer gave the farmer a contract listing the price for each type of tobacco. When the tobacco was delivered at the SNUFF COMPANY the receiver, who also had a copy of the contract, weighed the tobacco according to the types listed in the contract and figured the amount it came to. He sent these figures to the office bookkeeper who checked his figures for accuracy and wrote the farmer a check for the amount.

The country buyers were able to establish rapport with many farmers because of fair company policy in purchasing of the tobacco, because of the buyer's knowledge of tobacco which enabled him to be consistent in making a price, and because of the courtesy with which the farmers were treated by Company officials. As a result many farmers became almost permanent customers of the AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY, preferring to sell their tobacco to them. Therefore, these farmers made a greater effort to raise the snuff type of tobacco.

#### Buying on the Loose-Leaf Floors

The tobacco bought on the loose floors was received at Twenty-First Street entrance. It was already classified according to company grade, for the buyer put the grade

on it when he bought it at the floor. However, sometimes there were baskets with mixed grades, as one with the B and C grades. The tobacco in such a basket was sent to the classing tables for separation or reclassification as needed. Also, sometimes a buyer, as the result of the rapidity in which the sales were conducted, would get the wrong grade on a basket. The receiver would catch this and make a correction in the grade. However, the price the buyer bid was what was paid for it.

#### Aged in Wood

After the tobacco was classified it was prized in large wooden hogsheads weighing about 1800 pounds. These were stored for three years for the purpose of letting the tobacco age or mellow. The Hopkinsville Branch ran its own cooper shop and made its own hogsheads. The wood was bought from stave mills in Tennessee and was mainly oak. This is where the saying, "Tobacco aged in wood," comes from.

The hogshead storage house was located on the east side of the Hopkinsville plant and spur tracks from the L & N and Illinois Central railroads ran to it. However, the use of these tracks was abandoned as trucks gradually took over for shipping hogsheads to the manufacturing plants. The hogsheads were stacked three deep in the storage house when it was full.

### Duties of the Factory Foreman

The next promotion for a young man was to factory foreman. Among the duties of this position were the following:

1. Seeing that the classing line was running as it should be, with emphasis upon the classification of tobacco according to company grade.
2. Seeing that the right grades of tobacco were gotten to the right place.
3. Seeing that the prizing was being properly done.
4. Keeping the receiving of tobacco running smoothly and as fast as possible, and checking on its re-classification.
5. Checking on the tobacco in the storage rooms for condition. It had to be in a certain order before it could be handled.
6. Checking on the employees for their presence, their efficiency, and their utilization of time.
7. Shipping out hogsheads of tobacco to the manufacturing plants as requested.
8. Checking with the bulking of tobacco when more was bought than could be classed and prized at that time.
9. Coordinating everything connected with receiving, prizing, storing, and shipping.

### Plant Manager

The highest position a person could attain locally was that of Plant Manager. He had the over-all responsibility for the entire plant operation which included the buying, processing, storage, personnel management, and office operation.

## The Art of Buying

Buying tobacco is an art and some people can never learn it. Buying requires a thorough knowledge of all types of tobacco and how well they meet the Company grades. It demands quick decisions and an observing eye.

When one had become completely familiar with the Company's grades of tobacco, with the type of tobacco grown in the field and with the running of the factory he was gradually worked into the buying part of the industry.

This was perhaps the most fascinating and challenging job. It required the use of all knowledge previously learned, for it entailed the spending of thousands of dollars of the Company's money, with the profits partially depending upon successful buying. This knowledge had to be applied within seconds as the buyer glanced at the baskets of tobacco at the auction sale and as he competed with other buyers for his grades of tobacco. The auctioneer moved rapidly from one basket to the next.

The buyer also had to learn the sign language often used by the auctioneer and the buyers or he might find he had bid in a basket he didn't want or failed to get one he wanted.

At one time there were four buyers at the Hopkinsville plant; two usually bought in the country and two at the

loose-leaf floors. The four buyers included the manager, and the assistant manager who usually bought on the floors. The AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY at Hopkinsville was a busy place during the tobacco season for many years.

#### Important Role of Tobacco Men

Fifty years ago the tobacco men of this community, including those of the AMERICAN SNUFF COMPANY, knew a pride in their work which grew out of a sense of the important part they played in the life of the community. Today no one industry or occupation plays anything like the role in the community the tobacco industry did then. Therefore, it is not possible for any group to hold the unique place or play the role the Company employees did back in the twenties.

November 1976

-THE END-

## Supplement

May 17, 1979

The American Snuff Company (Conwood Corporation) sign was taken down and all the office furniture moved to Clarksville on this date.

May 18, 1979

The American Snuff Company telephone was disconnected, thus ending an era which began in 1900 when the American Snuff Company was built.