

## Oldham County had some farms, where did they all go?



By John Foster

Farming is increasingly becoming an old man's venture. The average farmer in Oldham County is nearing Social Security age. And even among Oldham County farmers who have been working burley for decades, most are leaving the tobacco business.

Not so with Justin Henderson.

His hands may be cracked and rough, but there isn't a wrinkle on his body, and his head full of red curly hair hasn't yet started to sprout any gray.

The average age of an Oldham County farmer is 57, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture. Henderson, 27, started growing tobacco on land he leases on Blakemore Lane a few years after graduating from Oldham County High School to supplement to his lawn mowing business — Maverick Grounds Maintenance. It gave him something to do in the slow winter months. He has since spread to harvesting a plot of land on Cedar Point Road as well. "Mowin' and growin'," the side of his truck says.

He joined the industry at a time many growers chose to get out as economic changes meant profit from tobacco is no longer worth the effort for some.

Henderson doesn't mind the hard work – he likes to farm tobacco.

Cutting and hanging tobacco has to be done in the 90-degree heat of late summer. It requires bending and lifting — and lifting — and lifting. If the tobacco's wet, it could make you sick. It can make allergies flare up. The process of stripping the leaves from the stalk requires less lifting, but takes place in the cold of winter. During the nice weather of a Kentucky October, well, during that time the tobacco hangs in the barn and cures from lime green to caramel brown.

"It's just kinda rough, it's rough on ya. That's why a lot of people don't like to do it, but I like it, yeah it's a good work out I think," he said.

He often gets his high school buddies to come out and help, reminding them of the weekends they spent in the fields together earning a few bucks for gas.

“Something about it, I’ve always really enjoyed fooling around with it,” he said.

Oldham County Agricultural Extension Agent Traci Missun offers help for Henderson and other farmers. She said Henderson is one of the hardest working young guys she’s met.

### Becoming part of history

Farming tobacco is rapidly fading into the history of Kentucky, like fields of hemp or the steamboat. Tobacco farming is down almost 90 percent in Oldham County since its peak in 1945, when farmers harvested about 1,250 acres. Now that number is about 135, according to the National Agriculture Statistics Service with a steep decline since the beginning of the decade. Henderson accounts for about 20 acres.

The demand nationwide closely follows the downward trend of farms growing tobacco. In the last 40 years, the percentage of Americans who smoke has dropped by half to about 20 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Henderson doesn’t regularly use tobacco himself. He pauses for a moment when asked if it bothers him that his product is bad for people’s health.

“Yeah, I guess,” he said with a nervous chuckle.

But smokers would buy their tobacco from China or somewhere else if he didn’t grow it, he speculates. And with the soil of central Kentucky, he can make more money growing tobacco than corn or soybeans, he said.

“It’s their choice to use it I guess. I don’t know if I’d recommend it to anybody. This goes right into Marlboro cigarettes, so...,” he said.

Because of the dichotomy of tobacco being good for farmers but bad for smokers, many people have mixed feelings about whether the disappearance of tobacco farms from Kentucky is a good or bad thing.

Bill Clary, director of public relations for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture said tobacco farming predates the formation of the state, “so, of course, it’s part of our heritage.”

But he thinks farmers should do whatever they think is best economically. And diversifying from tobacco is increasingly what farmers are choosing.

Liz Burrows, health educator for the Oldham County Health Department, wants to see a decreased demand for tobacco — especially among Oldham County’s youth. On the other hand, she has tobacco farmers in her family and recognizes what tobacco has traditionally meant for the state of Kentucky — a source of income to provide food, housing and education for thousands of families.

While she understands the transition to other crops has been difficult, “I think most farmers would agree that they don’t want to see kids smoking,” she said.

### Why the decrease

in farming?

Burrows is encouraged by data showing a decrease in the number of underage smokers. Surveys administered by the Oldham County Board of Education show between 2002 and 2006, the number of students who had smoked in the last 30 days decreased in all categories tested — eighth, 10th and 12th graders, although a third of 12th graders still smoked.

Statistics from the CDC show the percentage of smokers in the U.S. has been in a slow decline since the 60s and in 2007, the percentage of adults who are smokers dropped below 20 percent for the first time.

Kentucky still has the highest rate of smoking, but is in similar decline. What may decrease the demand for tobacco further is a 70 cents per cigarette pack tax increase Gov. Steve Beshear proposed in December.

Burrows points out that even if everyone in Kentucky quits smoking — which she would support — it would make almost no impact on the global demand.

Although demand for tobacco is decreasing in Kentucky and the rest of the country, that decrease can't be strongly linked to the decrease in tobacco farming for one simple reason — worldwide demand is increasing.

Information from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization shows the demand in the developing world continues to rise, with China leading the way. But while most of Henderson's and some other farmers' tobacco goes overseas, production is also shifting to those countries due to the lower labor costs and lack of production restrictions, according to the U.N.

The playing field has been leveled for those countries in the last decade with the dismantling of federal price supports for tobacco, Clary said.

During The Great Depression, the federal government created price supports for various agricultural products. Supports for tobacco outlasted the rest, keeping payments to American tobacco farmers artificially high until earlier this decade. As a result, a farmer could make a decent living on a small plot of land, Clary said. When Congress dissolved the price supports, farmers suddenly had to compete with the world market, and many determined there were more profitable ways to make a living based on the land they have — whether it is converting their land for corn, cows or cul-de-sacs.

About the same time, the major tobacco companies settled the multibillion-dollar Master Settlement Agreement with the U.S. Attorney General. Missun said Kentucky government officials chose to use much of the money from the settlement to help farmers diversify their crops beyond tobacco. Many farmers took that money and got out of tobacco altogether. Others decided they could make more money with beef cattle, turning Kentucky into the largest beef producer east of the Mississippi River, she said.

What should happen

to farmland?

It doesn't matter too much whether a farmer chooses to grow corn or cows or tobacco to Doug Wampler. What he cares about is whether that farmland is converted into subdivisions responsibly — without overworking Oldham County's infrastructure.

Wampler is executive director of the non-profit Oldham Ahead, which promotes what it considers wise land use in Oldham County.

In about the last 60 years, Oldham County has seen the amount of land used for agriculture halved.

In 1944, 120,873 acres were farm land in Oldham County, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That number is now below 60,000. Between 1997 and 2002, the amount of land in farms decreased by more than six acres a day.

Disappearing with it is the rural character of the county, Wampler said. While some farmland may be responsible to develop, he said, some would require more cost in infrastructure than the county could ever recoup in taxes.

On the other hand, agricultural land does not require much infrastructure from the county, but contributes strongly to the economy. Farmers purchase grain for their animals, lumber for their barns, trucks for their fields and while they earn a discount on their taxes, they still pay the county more than they take, Wampler said.

Farming probably doesn't receive as much credit as it deserves for what it provides Oldham County, Wampler said.

Henderson, on the other hand, doesn't care too much about receiving credit. He just cares about working with his friends doing a job he enjoys and having something to do until the grass needs cutting again.

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