

Photo of the Month

Tobacco and Benton County



The interior of a tobacco-grading barn in Benton County, about 1885. Courtesy of J. Dickson Black (Neg. #N012254)

One often-surprising bit of information about early Benton County is that tobacco was a significant cash crop between the 1840s and 1880s. Reportedly newcomers from Kentucky introduced tobacco cultivation to the area around 1833 or 1834. At first the tobacco grown at home was raised primarily for family use, but by 1840 there was a significant market for it.

Research indicates that tobacco grown in Benton County was of high quality and that it brought an excellent price at market. The county shipped 37,725 pounds of top-grade tobacco in 1860. Understandably little was grown or marketed during the Civil War years; however, beginning around 1868 new tobacco barns were being erected and by 1870 tobacco was Benton County's big cash crop.

Among the tobacco varieties grown at the time were Virginia Golden Leaf, White Burley, Yellow Pryor, and Hico Wrapper Leaf. Two-story, log tobacco barns became a common sight. Historian J. Dickson Black reported that "In 1876, Ollie Anderson of Vaughn community says he helped raise ten tobacco barns in ten days within three miles of his home." In 1879 an acre of tobacco cost \$43.50 for seed and labor and made a profit of \$28 to \$100, depending on quality.

In the 1870s the high quality of local tobacco brought in buyers from as far away as St. Louis and also led to the development of several small tobacco factories in Bentonville which produced cigars, smoking tobacco, and chewing tobacco. Among the largest of these companies was Trotter & Wilkes (called Arkansas Tobacco Company after 1887) which sold their tobacco over a six-state area. In the late 1880s the factory employed thirty men and boys and had a \$500 monthly payroll; it went out of business sometime in the 1890s.

By 1888 the quality of the Benton County tobacco crop had declined; that year the 400,000 pounds that were sold brought a much lower price. At the same time, tobacco farmers began to supplement their crops with fruit orchards and other fruit crops such as strawberries. As farmers began to decrease their tobacco acreage, the buyers stopped coming, which put an end to the Benton County tobacco market. One of the last newspaper ads for tobacco in the county was run in 1893 by Bentonville's Smiley & Hancock company.

The Benton County Democrat reported on 25 August 1898: *Arkansas has been dropped from the statistical report of Tobacco growing states. This should not be, as we have as favorable conditions for the culture of tobacco as any state in the Union, but the reason for its being dropped is the light acreage.*

Soon enough tobacco farming gave way to livestock production and other cash crops such as oats, potatoes, corn, wheat, and wool. And within a few years the fruit industry took a major hold in Benton County, making it prominent nationally by the first decade of the 1900s.