



# SHADY PA

BY DONATO PIETRODANGELO

If you listen real hard, you can hear the sounds of 40 or 50 people at work. Someone's shouting orders. You can smell the crop, smell the sweat. Voices buzzing, hoofs stomping the ground outside, the creak of wheels, the clank of harness.

It's really only a 60-foot length of empty, sweltering darkness. In a slow, humid breeze, only the swinging of a weathered shutter and the flapping of a loose tin roof break the stillness.

For most of the past 10 to 15 years, it's been like this. All that's left of shade-tobacco country today are the long, faded red, wood barns — empty and baking in the sun.

The shade-tobacco barns aren't as quaint as the barns of New England, nor as imposing as the barns of the Midwest. But they have their own dignity. Nothing fancy, just straightaway and functional.

Silent now, some rotting in disrepair, the

barns are the remnants of an entire industry, one of hard work and low pay for some, prosperity for others. Shade-grown tobacco is gone.

When an industry dies, whether it's a mine worked out or a plant shut down, people lose more than jobs. Often, they lose a way of life.

"Yeah, I miss it. It's a pretty good miss," says Murray Spooner, born and raised in Gadsden County. He has spent most of his 67 years in tobacco farming. "That's all you know. That's all I've ever done. About 99 percent of the county was farming shade tobacco. Mostly small farms. There were three or four big companies at one time. My daddy worked for them. I was born on one of their farms."

In his slow, North Florida drawl, Spooner talks about shade-tobacco farming, and about tobacco barns, with a sense of longing: "It happened in about three years. Yes sir, it disappeared. At one time we were exempt from the minimum wage . . . I worked, myself, for 30 cents a day when I was a kid, way back yonder. Then they required us to pay the minimum wage be-





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fore it was over with. That's about the straw that broke the camel's back."

**S**hade-grown tobacco has only one purpose: It's used as the outside wrapping on cigars. Its leaves, grown in shade, are thinner than those of smoking tobacco. It was grown in Gadsden and Madison counties, among other places in the eastern U.S., for nearly 150 years, until rising labor costs caused the domestic industry to go under. It couldn't compete with lower-priced imports from Central America. "It was competition from Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador — down there where they got a revolution going now," says Spooner.

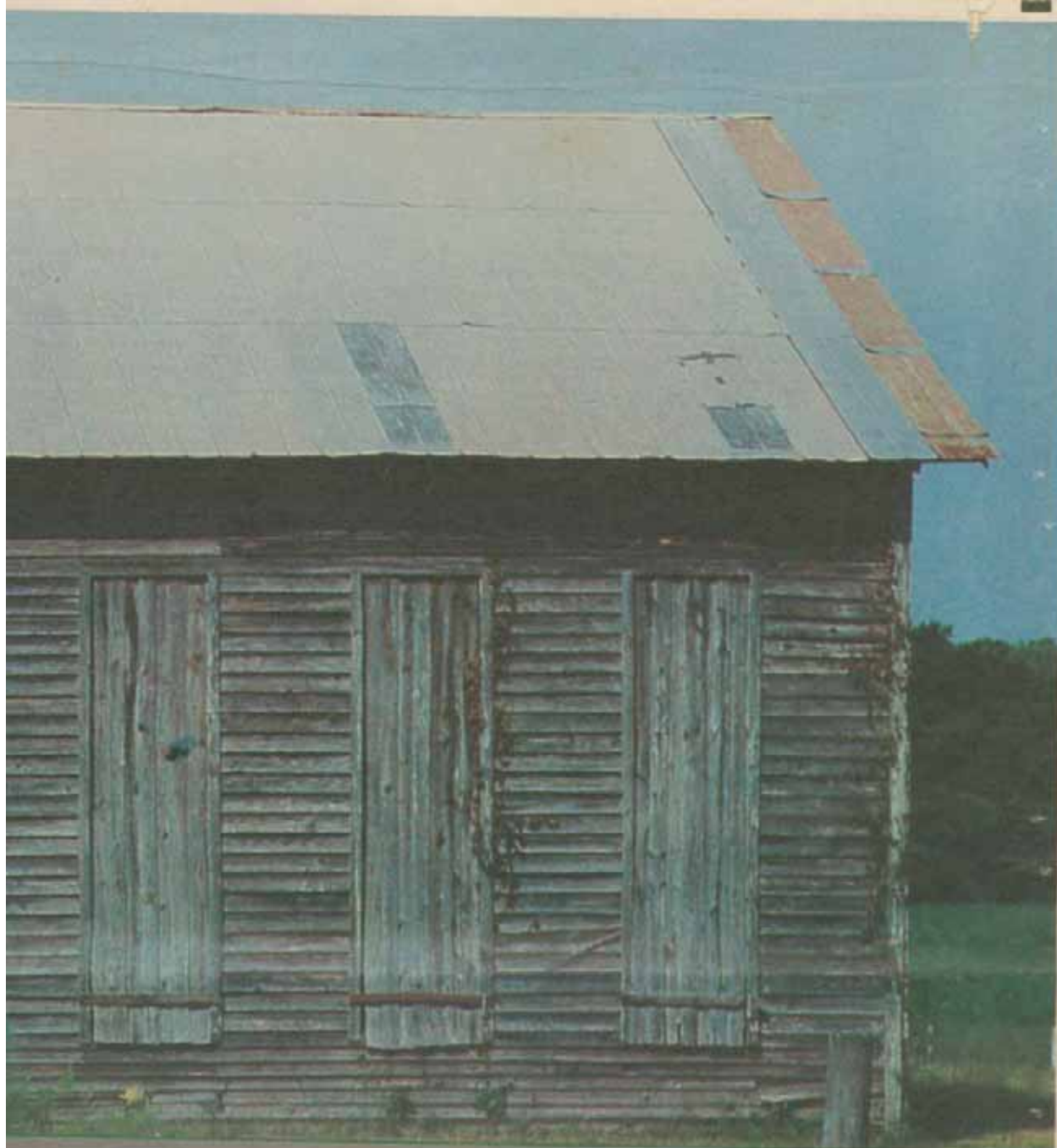
Tucked against the Georgia border just west of Tallahassee, Gadsden County was devastated by the collapse in the early '70s. Since then, an aggressive campaign to bring in light industry and to substitute tomatoes as an agricultural base has helped, but Gadsden is still small and poor. Its population of about 42,000 residents had a per capita income of \$4,971 in 1980. (By comparison, Orange County's was \$9,583.)

The last remaining shade-tobacco barns, many built in the 1940s and now abandoned, still dot the rolling countryside. But many of the oldest have been destroyed. "They're taxed at a helluva rate," says Gordon Dean, 60, who moved to Gadsden County from New England in the mid-'40s. "That's how the county lived, by taxing the tobacco farmers and taxing their barns. So once the crop was out, loads and loads of people destroyed their barns to avoid taxes. Tore um down left and right. Burned um up."

Some of those remaining are unused, dilapidated and weather-worn. Others stand in good repair, kept for storage — or sentiment.

Long rectangles with steep roofs, the barns were built in four-foot increments in length and width. Freshly picked leaves were tied by a hand-operated stringing machine to 52-inch sticks, or "lathes," to dry. The precise building design allowed the greatest number of lathes to rest on wooden racks, which were four feet wide and reached high toward the barn's ceiling. A newly loaded lathe could weigh up to 40 pounds,





which was considered a manageable load for workers, standing on beams, to hand above to other workers. A large barn could hold about 36,000 sticks. By the time the tobacco was dried, the sticks weighed four to a pound — a total of up to 9,000 pounds of dry crop. Just 10 ounces would wrap 1,000 cigars.

**T**all, narrow windows and an open space along the bottom of the barn provided ventilation for air-drying the crop. Farmers also built fires in the barns to increase the heat. "We used to use wood and charcoal," says Spooner. "Right after World War II we switched to LP [liquid propane] gas. It's much easier and cleaner. It doesn't get the tobacco cured any faster, but this barn here, it'd take a man, starting at daylight, till 10 o'clock or 11 to get all the fires lit. You tried to have a little more heat inside than outside. If it was 95 degrees outside, you wanted it 97 or 98 inside to push the heat out. You couldn't have any humidity in there — it would form on the leaf and rot it."

Gordon Dean, who this year grew winter wheat, lives near the town of Havana, pronounced "Hey-vanna." His barn, once painted red with a lead-and-oil solution, has faded to silver-gray on the sunward side. He now uses it for storage. Building it, back in the spring of 1946, took 40,000 board feet of lumber.

"All you had to do was go to the mills and tell the guy, 'I'm building a barn so-and-so long and I got so-and-so pitch of roof. Get up the materials.' He knew exactly the size and length of every stick you needed for the whole barn. Those mills were running seven days a week, cranking it out, 10-12-hour days."

Murray Spooner, who has retired and now leases his land to other farmers, built his six barns himself, with farm labor. Each one took about two weeks to get up, he recalls. One of them, built in 1947, is mammoth — 160 feet by 42 feet, divided by a partition.

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*(Above) Gordon Dean's barn, near Havana, Fla.*

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He and the other farmers recall the particulars of each barn as if it were a member of the family: "This wood came off of my land." He points. "Right over there across the creek. That barn over there, I got a man to come in here with what they call a little 'coffee pot' mill. He had a big tractor that pulled it, and he did his own cutting right here in the woods."

**S**entiment aside, function was the farmers' main concern. The barns were indispensable to the task at hand: growing shade tobacco.

Seeds were sown in a plant bed in January and transplanted between March 15 and April 25, when the plants were about five inches tall, says Spooner. The farmers tried to have the crop in the barn by July 4th.

The leaves had to be thinner than those of smoking tobacco: The secret was shade. The entire crop grew under cheesecloth covers suspended on wires several feet above the ground. This shroud filtered the sunlight and made the leaves grow thin. The thinner the leaf, the better the cigar wrapper.

Picking the leaves took special talent. "Everybody couldn't do it," says Spoon-

er. "You had to grow up in it to kinda know how. You had to be careful pulling leaves from the other side of the stalk not to hit another stalk and tear it. Damaged tobacco is no good. If you had a hole in it, it wouldn't smoke. There's an art to it."

Pickers would start off at the bottom of the stalk, picking two leaves called "sand leaves," he recalls. These are small but are the best tobacco on the plant. The top four leaves, thicker and smaller, were discarded.

After barn-drying, the crop was sold in January, just as the farmers were preparing for the next season.

Inside the now closed-up barn, rays of sunlight sneak through a gash in the metal roof. In the shadows, a stringing machine lies rusting, a stack of lathes sits against the wall, ashes from long burnt-out fires rest on the dirt floor. Light plays on the tall beams.

Because of taxes or the wear of the weather, most of the shade-tobacco barns may disappear from Gadsden County in years to come.

That'll be, as Murray Spooner would say, "a pretty good miss."

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