

Tobacco

by John Riley

When you prime tobacco the old way, moving down a row, hunched over at the waist, snapping the bottom three leaves off the stalk and stuffing them under your arm, you'll get thick black wads of tobacco gum from your armpit to your waist. The bottom leaves, the ones you're picking, yellowing a bit at the tip and along the veined edges, are the last to dry. If you're lucky you get the row closest to the wide sled row so that, when you're loaded with all the tobacco you can carry, it's only a short shuffle to drop the leaves into the sled. If you're unlucky, or are too young or too old or too slow, the field hand in charge of pulling the sled forward might leave you behind and you'll have to walk twice as far to unload. But it'll be okay. When they reach the end of their rows the rest of the primers won't mind taking a minute to catch their breath. Maybe they'll even have a short Coke and a package of nabs while they wait.

