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MARKETING STRATEGIES OF CONNECTICUT RIVER VALLEY TOBACCO

FOR USE AS CIGAR BINDERS AND CIGAR WRAPPERS

BY

JAMES P. FITZPATRICK JR.

A creative component submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Science

Major: Seed Technology and Business

Program of Study Committee

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Abstract

This paper explores how marketing strategies of Connecticut River Valley tobacco evolved over the past three-hundred and seventy-eight years. Qualitative data collected via personal and phone interviews with tobacco growers who produce tobacco along a stretch of the Connecticut River between central Connecticut and northern Massachusetts. Data was also collected from publications, the United States Department of Agriculture, the worldwide web, and museums. Tobacco buyers were also interviewed, in the same manner as the growers, and their answers were also categorized. Although the techniques for growing crops throughout all of agriculture have changed during the period of 1640 until the present, there have been few changes with the New England tobacco crop. The growers two primary marketing strategies have always been: grow the highest quality crop possible and produce a type of tobacco that is desirable. The growers in the Connecticut River Valley had been progressive with the actual production of the tobacco crop for the first two-hundred and eighty years, but the past one hundred years appears to have stagnated to a point, especially in regards with how the crop is sold. Even with a steady decline in acres in the previous decades, the tobacco crop has played a significant role in the development of the communities of the region.
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Introduction

Agriculture is very diverse throughout the world. Corn and soybeans for example, are produced around the globe, but different strategies are used to grow and market these commodities depending on where you are located. Corn and soybeans are major commodities, but there are farms, particularly in the United States, that grow niche crops because of the potential for market share in a particular region. A niche crop tends to have different growing techniques or practices that are not normal to a region. They can sometimes feel like they are out of place, but are grown in the region possibly because of micro climates, soil types, or simply because of historical significance. If any niche crop is to be a success, it must be marketable; the niche product must have a characteristic that allows it to stand alone and make it memorable. Marketing strategies of niche crops must be planned and somewhat predictable because production tends to be costly. In some cases where the niche crop is specific to a region because of its history, marketing strategies may need to adjust to meet changing demands. Agriculture has drastically changed over the last three centuries and it is only fitting that marketing strategies have changed and will continue to change over the same period of time. The marketing strategies that may need to adjust over time may not necessarily be how the crop is sold, but changing crop varieties or taking advantage of an opportunity when it presents itself.

When people think about tobacco production in the United States the Mid Atlantic and Southern regions of the country come to mind. Few people realize that some of the premium tobacco grown for fine cigars throughout the world is produced in the Connecticut River Valley in
New England. There is an area along the Connecticut River that runs from Northern Massachusetts to Central Connecticut, about sixty-one miles long and ten miles wide, that is the epicenter of tobacco production that produces some of the finest cigar wrappers in the world. That region has shrunk over time by about twenty-five percent. The tobacco grown in the valley has fetched a higher sales price per pound than any other tobacco grown in the United States for well over the past one hundred years.

The tobacco that is grown in the region has flourished because of number of reasons. For example, there are large flat meadows with a silty loam textured soil that was created by glaciers that are ideal for growing tobacco. The regions short hot summers also make tobacco an ideal crop to be grown in this river valley. Also, the three current types of tobacco that are grown in the region have had a large effect on the tobacco’s marketing success.

There have been three specific types of tobacco grown in this region for a number of years; Broadleaf, Havana Seed, and Connecticut Shade tobaccos. All three types of tobacco have their own characteristics and uses. Most farms have always specialized in one of the types and sometimes have grown a second type for a variety of reasons. The original tobacco in the Connecticut River Valley was a wild native plant that the Mohawk Indians were collecting and smoking in their pipes. When the settlers first came to the area in 1633 the Mohawks showed them tobacco which the settlers would eventually start to cultivate around 1640 (Anderson, 1953). The wild tobacco that is native to the area is a black tobacco that is considered to be very harsh, and it can still be found today growing wild along the river.
Methodology

The point of focus with the research for the paper is marketing strategies, since there were few numbers to collect and analyze, qualitative research methods were used. Historical data was collected from a number of sources including books, publications, the worldwide web, museums, universities, interviews with current and former tobacco growers, as well as interviews with buyers of the tobacco. Because of the similarities in the crops and price, production and income from tobacco sales in Maryland and Virginia were used for comparisons with the Connecticut River Valley tobacco during the early stages of its cultivation in New England.

The grower interviews were used to collect marketing strategies from the early 1900’s until the present, as well as their thoughts about the future strategies that may be used. Growers were picked for a variety of reasons such as the number of acres grown, the location of their production, number of years growing the crop, types of tobacco that they grow, and some growers were also picked at random.

The interview questions used for research purposes were:

1. How long have you been growing tobacco commercially?
2. When did your family begin growing tobacco commercially?
3. What are the current types of tobacco you are growing?
4. Why are you growing these types of tobacco?
5. Have you grown any of the other types of tobacco that are common to the area?
   a. If yes, why have you stopped?
b. If no, why have you not tried growing different types?

6. How do you currently sell your tobacco?
   a. Contract?
      i. By acres or pounds sold?
   b. Wholesale?
   c. Direct Market?

7. If you have a contract to sell your tobacco for a specific amount, do you grow extra to fulfill your contract in the event of crop failure, or do you sell to a different buyer?

8. Do you market your entire crop the same way, or by field because you know a field may not grow the best quality tobacco?

9. Has the process of selling your tobacco changed?
   a. From ten years ago?
   b. From twenty years ago?
   c. Since you planted your first crop?

10. How do you plan on marketing your tobacco in the future?

11. What would cause you to leave the industry?

12. How much does it currently cost to produce an acre of tobacco?
   a. Ten years ago?
   b. Twenty years ago?

13. Is there any family history you would like to share that you think is relevant to our conversation?

14. What is your biggest concern moving forward with the niche tobacco industry you are currently supplying?
15. Do you grow other crops?

Answers to the questions were documented and charted depending on the answers. For example, similar answers were grouped together and percentages were based off of the number in the group divided by the total number of participants or answers if multiple answers were given. There was a total of fifteen growers interviewed, once the data collected became saturated it seemed no longer beneficial to conduct interviews.

Tobacco buyers were asked a different set of questions compared to the growers, the questions were as follows:

1. How long has the company been purchasing tobacco from farms in the New England region?
2. Is there any history you would like to share as to why the company started to buy and sell Connecticut River Valley tobacco?
3. What percentage of the tobacco that you purchase in the region is:
   a. Broadleaf?
   b. Havana Seed?
   c. Connecticut Shade?
4. How have those percentages changed?
5. How did the Dairy and Tobacco Adjustment Act of 1983 affect the way you bought tobacco in the region?
6. Did the embargo against Cuba in 1960 affect your marketing strategies in any way?
7. Where do you sell the tobacco that is bought in New England?
8. How long are you holding the tobacco before you sell it?
9. Is the tobacco sold using:
a. Auctions?

b. Direct marketing?

10. Does the type of tobacco being sold have any affect on the sales methods?

11. What has disrupted the market in the past?

12. What could disrupt the market in the future?

Buyer data was also cataloged similarly to the grower’s data, it was categorized and analyzed for trends in how they purchase and sell tobacco.
Results & Discussion

Marketing Strategies from 1640-1800

When the colonists in the area first settled, they immediately started to grow tobacco that the Mohawk Indians taught them about. The first areas in New England that had commercial tobacco production were along the Connecticut River which was a main trade route. This trade route would eventually become one of the main reasons for its initial success. Trade up the river imported a new tobacco variety, Shoestring tobacco. The Shoestring tobacco was used for pipe smoking as well as chewing (Anderson, 1953). Like their counterparts in the Southern Colonies, they used the tobacco as currency because at that point there was no silver or gold found. Since tobacco was being used as a currency, they developed a conversion to convert tobacco to the gold standard (Scharf, 1967).

The tobacco was used to purchase things that could not be produced on the farm, as well as pay taxes, fines, or fees. All of the tobacco grown in New England was marketed locally from 1640 until around 1700 (Dunlap, 2016). If it was not used to barter or pay bills, it was sold to local shops. The tobacco in the Southern New England region was the first cash crop, much like the tobacco in the Virginia Colony. Some farms in the Housatonic Valley in western Connecticut and into western Massachusetts tried growing the Shoestring tobacco when the area was first being colonized, but this only lasted into the late seventeenth century. The growers in the Housatonic Valley did not have the benefits of the same soil or the large flat meadows that cover the Connecticut River Valley (Anderson, 1953). Additionally, the Housatonic River did not have the
same amount of trade through its valley partially because it is a much faster currents and also the river had more obstacles. If the Housatonic Valley growers wanted to sell their tobacco in the Hartford or Springfield markets it would have required a minimum of a five-day trip.

The Shoestring tobacco that was being grown had its own marketing challenges. A combination of the plant’s structure, the amount of tobacco the region was producing, as well as the tobacco that was being produced in Virginia and Maryland all played a role in the future of New England tobacco production. The Connecticut Colony’s legislature created obstacles for tobacco growers also early on because they were trying to persuade people from using tobacco. The legislature passed a law that would only allow a person to use tobacco while out in fields or woods, and not within ten miles of towns (Dunlap, 2016). They also made people purchase certificates stating that they were in good enough health to use tobacco (Dunlap, 2016). In some ways the chewing tobacco market was increased in the infancy of the region’s tobacco industry because Connecticut and Massachusetts each had smoking bans in the mid-1600’s but chewing tobacco was still allowed (Dunlap, 2016), both laws would later be appealed, once the original smoking bans were appealed. Connecticut did help their tobacco growers by passing a law in the mid-1600’s that required people of Connecticut to use only Connecticut grown tobacco (Stewart, 1922). This law created the first tobacco boom in the region; and Connecticut growers could not grow enough.

By the mid-1700’s Connecticut had changed its original view of tobacco because of the economic benefits. In 1753, the General Assembly in Connecticut passed a law that stopped the export of tobacco from Connecticut that was not stamped and sealed by a town official (Stewart, 1922). The officials that inspected the tobacco were elected to the office at an annual meeting of
all the tobacco growers in Connecticut. After Connecticut passed the law Massachusetts followed soon after in order to maintain the quality of their exports as well as to compete with Connecticut.

The early tobacco growers in the Connecticut River Valley were their own plant breeders, they would save the seed from the best plants; the plants that had better quality leaves that would not shred as easily while still attached to the plant. They also selected plants with larger leaves; the larger leaves were selected for quality reasons and not yield. The selection of plants for quality over yield started a trend for the growers that has lasted for over three hundred years. This plant breeding process took over a hundred years for the growers to improve the quality of the tobacco leaves enough to make it a desirable crop for foreign markets.

Towards the end of the eighteenth-century cigar usage started to become more popular. The tobacco growers were able to capture some of this market share because the generations of growers before them had the foresight to improve their tobacco quality. The larger tobacco leaves that had been bred worked well for the cigar binders and wrappers that were needed.

Another marketing challenge that the tobacco growers in New England faced was producing a product and entering a market that had been established forty years earlier in Jamestown, Virginia and that would later spread to Maryland. The tobacco that was planted in Virginia had a different flavor from the Shoestring tobacco but they were considered equal in the eyes of England for export reasons. When growers in New England started growing tobacco the Virginia producers were trying to quench England’s thirst for colonial tobacco and they were doing an excellent job.

The growers in New England were eventually able to gain market share first in New York because of their plant selection process and concentrating on only producing high quality tobacco.
This concept eventually paid off around 1700 when they started to export their Shoestring tobacco to England as well as Dutch colonies. Later into the eighteenth-century New England tobacco would stretch farther into Europe. The Shoestring tobacco would eventually become the preferred tobacco in Europe around 1800 (Anderson, 1953).

Finally, the last obstacle that New England tobacco growers needed to hurdle to properly market their tobacco was to produce enough of it. Shortly after the colonization of the region tobacco was produced commercially but there were still not enough acres available to enter foreign markets. The tobacco growers’ initial goal was to survive, so land needed to be used to grow food to consume, extra land was put into tobacco production. It took the tobacco growers over fifty years to clear forests and put more land into production farming. The Virginia settlement that was exporting as much tobacco as they could produce had already been through the same process well before the New Englanders had arrived. In 1639 Virginia and Maryland exported 1,500,000 pounds of tobacco to England (ArchiveTobacco.org, 1995). By 1700, with the inclusion of New England tobacco, England was importing 20,000,000 pounds of tobacco from the colonies (ArchiveTobacco.org, 1995).

The exact price that the tobacco growers received for their product is unknown, but it was considered a luxury item. Because of its luxury status there were high duties placed on it, for example, four hundred and fifty-nine pounds of tobacco were being exported to the West Indies from Connecticut in 1740 and a one-hundred-pound levee was placed on the shipment (Dunlap, 2016), that is equivalent to over $18,500 of today’s money.
Marketing Strategies from 1800-1900

A majority of Connecticut River Valley tobacco grown from 1640 until the end of the Eighteenth Century was used for pipe smoking and chewing. In 1803 the tobacco growers in the region received a benefit to the niche crop because there was a shift in the smoking of cigars. There were more people smoking cigars than using tobacco in any other way. The New England tobacco growers saw the potential in how the market was changing but would struggle to take advantage of the market if they continued to grow the Shoestring tobacco that they were growing.

Connecticut and Massachusetts natives were traveling through the Mid-Atlantic colonies as well as the Caribbean and found new varieties of tobacco that they felt had potential. Within a few years of the introduction of the new tobacco type to the region there was an enormous shift of growth from the Shoestring tobacco to the new Broadleaf tobacco (Anderson, 1953). The characteristics of the new tobacco leaves were ideal for cigar production.

The first Broadleaf tobacco seeds were brought to Connecticut by Israel Putnam, who was a Revolutionary War General in 1763 (Dunlap, 2016). Israel Putnam gathered the seeds while on an expedition in the Caribbean. Putnam was impressed with the taste and look of the cigars that were being made with this Broadleaf tobacco and saw the potential for Connecticut tobacco growers. The Broadleaf tobacco plants were much shorter than the wild tobacco that was originally cultivated but the lower leaves were extremely large and were also much less harsh when smoked. Another variety of Broadleaf tobacco that was imported to the area was Barbour; the seeds were brought to New England from Maryland in the 1830’s (Anderson, 1953).
The shift in tobacco acres from the Shoestring to Broadleaf tobacco created another industry that spread from Boston to New York City: cigar making. The cigar making industry started with the wives and daughters of the growers rolling cigars and selling them. It was not long until these cottage industry cigar makers could not keep up with the demands and large warehouses were built to meet the ever-growing desire for the product (Dunlap, 2016). With the boom in the cigar industry, tobacco acres started to increase in the Connecticut River Valley. It is estimated that there was between eight and nine hundred acres of Shoestring and Broadleaf tobacco grown in the region in 1839 with almost all of the acres being the Broadleaf tobacco (Anderson, 1953). By 1869, tobacco acres had increased to about twelve thousand acres, and the Shoestring tobacco was no longer being grown (USDA, 2018).

Although the Broadleaf tobacco was more valuable than Shoestring tobacco it was not ideal for cigar wrappers; the preferred use of the Broadleaf tobacco was the cigar binder, the layer of the cigar under the wrapper. One problem the tobacco growers were having was with the leaf veins of the Broadleaf tobacco, they tended to be very large. They leaf veins of the Broadleaf tobacco leaves needed to be trimmed if they were to be used for the cigar wrappers, growers were looking for a new type that would be better for the wrapper leaf, as well as make their product even more distinct.

The Havana Seed tobacco filled the void that the Connecticut River Valley growers were looking for. Havana Seed tobacco’s history is not as long in the region but still dates back to the 1870’s. It is uncertain how tobacco seed came to the Connecticut River Valley by way of Cuba (Anderson, 1953). It is obvious that the climates in New England and Cuba are very different from one another, so because of the different growing climates the plants grown in Connecticut and Massachusetts look nothing like the plants grown from the same seed in Cuba. Havana Seed
tobacco was first used because of its taste, aroma, and value of the leaves to be used as cigar wrappers. Although the leaves of Havana Seed tobacco were smaller than Broadleaf tobacco, the veins in the leaves were much smaller making it more suitable for cigar wrappers (Anderson, 1953). During the late 1800’s and early 1900’s the popularity of it flourished and it was grown from the western side of the Connecticut river in Connecticut, all through the valley in Massachusetts. At the end of the nineteenth century there was about fifteen thousand acres (Chart 1) of tobacco grown in the Connecticut River Valley with between sixty and seventy percent of the acres being the Broadleaf type (USDA, 2018).

![Harvested Acres from 1866-1900](chart1.jpg)

**Chart 1:** Acres of tobacco harvested in Connecticut and Massachusetts from 1866-1900

In 1875 the tobacco growers in the Connecticut River Valley were greeted with additional help. The Connecticut Experimental Station was founded in order to help farms in New England become better growers. They supported farmers by testing new farming techniques, developing
new crop varieties, and varietal testing. The experiment station’s work with soil conservation would eventually help to bring a new type of tobacco to the region that had the potential to be even more profitable. The Connecticut Experimental Station did little breeding work with the Broadleaf tobacco, but there was intense breeding work done with the Havana Seed tobacco, partially because it was the new type of tobacco grown in the region when the station was founded. Also, Havana Seed tobacco had much more value than the Broadleaf tobacco. When breeding work is done on any of the major crops grown; corn, soybeans, and wheat for example, they are always trying to increase yields in order to increase profitability. The Connecticut Experimental Station recorded yield data from its varietal trials but it was not their main focus, at that time the growers in the region were most concerned with finding varieties that developed the highest quality leaf. The farms understood that they were growing a niche crop with a specific purpose and that the quality of the leaf was more important than the pounds of leaves that could be harvested per acre.

The Havana Seed tobacco gave the New England tobacco growers the slight market edge that they were looking for but they were still in competition with growers in Cuba and Asia at the end of the Nineteenth Century. Growers throughout the region worked once again with the Connecticut Experimental Station to find a new type of tobacco. The station did find a variety of tobacco, but different techniques would be needed in order to develop a tobacco leaf that would become the most desired cigar wrapper leaf in the world.
Marketing Strategies from 1900-1940

The New England tobacco growers were aware that they needed to continue to grow a high-quality product that consumers wanted to buy. Examples of this concept are when they switched from the original Shoestring tobacco to the new Broadleaf tobacco varieties and then when they started growing the Havana Seed tobacco to better compete in the cigar wrapper market. When Sumatra tobacco started being imported into the United States, tobacco growers along the east coast, as well as the United States Department of Agriculture, knew that it could disrupt United States markets (Dunlap, 2016). The government was willing to administer grants to study the Sumatra tobacco and determine the best ways to grow the crop in the United States. The Connecticut Experimental Station was awarded the grants not only because of their previous work with tobacco, but mainly because of their work with soil conservation with the New England tobacco growers.

In 1900, the Connecticut Experimental Station completed a study on one third of an acre using the Sumatra tobacco, which originally came from an island in Indonesia (Anderson, 1953). The seed was germinated in hothouses, and then transplanted in fields. Once the tobacco was transplanted, cedar posts were set in the field in a grid pattern with wire attached to the top of the posts spanning the field. With the wire in place, cheesecloth was laid out across the wire and along the sides of the fields creating a tent to shade the tobacco plants. The thought process behind the tenting was, when the Sumatra tobacco was grown in Florida researchers noticed that the tobacco grew differently when it was shaded by the Palm trees, the shaded tobacco had a more desirable leaf (Dunlap, 2016). The tent like structures increased the humidity directly around the plants to better mimic the growing environments in Cuba and South America. The shading effect and added
humidity created an environment in which the plants thrived. The new technique would allow growers in the region to produce some of the most pristine tobacco leaves for cigar wrapper in the world. Because of the shading effect on the tobacco it was named Connecticut Shade tobacco.

Connecticut Shade tobacco had been carefully selected for uniform plants, which is important because of the micro climates that are being developed. The Connecticut Experimental Station spent ten years crossing varieties with the original Sumatra tobacco developing a variety that worked well. The Shade tobacco plants are much different than the Broadleaf and Havana Seed tobacco; the Connecticut Shade tobacco has smaller leaves and is a much taller plant (Anderson, 1953). While the Broadleaf type and Havana Seed tobaccos are about four feet tall after the seed head has been removed, the Connecticut Shade tobacco is roughly six feet tall. The leaves from the Connecticut Shade tobacco had small leaf veins, were more pliable, and had a velvety feel even throughout the curing process (Dunlap, 2016). After 1910, once a new Connecticut Shade tobacco variety was available, the number of Connecticut Shade acres started to increase at a more rapid pace. In 1900 there was a third of an acre of Connecticut Shade tobacco planted and five-thousand acres in 1919 (USDA, 2018). Since 1900 Connecticut Shade tobacco has sold for the highest price per pound than any other tobaccos grown in the United States (USDA, 2018).

The reason for the higher demand at the beginning of the Twentieth Century was World War I, there was a great demand for cigars to be shipped to Europe during the war effort depleting the stock piles that had been previously created. Tobacco production peaked in the Connecticut River Valley in 1921 when over forty-one thousand acres (Chart 2) of tobacco had been harvested (USDA, 2018). Fifty-five percent of the tobacco harvested in 1921 was the Broadleaf, twenty-five percent was the Havana Seed, and twenty percent was the Connecticut Shade tobaccos (USDA,
This marks the point of a steady decline in tobacco acres in the region for a number of different reasons.

Chart 2: Acres of tobacco harvested in Connecticut and Massachusetts form 1900-1940

Some of the reasons for the decline of tobacco acres after 1921 were population shifts, manufacturing, land prices, over production, cigarette usage, and the Great Depression. There are two cities in the middle of the Connecticut River Valley, that were partially built upon the taxes collected from tobacco, Hartford, CT and Springfield, MA. The region is also surrounded by Boston, MA; New Haven, CT; Bridgeport, CT; and New York, New York. During the 1920’s and 1930’s there was a population shift from the rural areas that were growing tobacco to these numerous cities. The cities had more opportunities for consistent salaries via manufacturing jobs.
and jobs in the insurance industry, therefore reducing the amount of labor needed to work in the tobacco fields. The developing cities created an increase in land values for the fields that were on outskirts of the Hartford, CT and Springfield, MA.

Up until the Great Depression tobacco was an open market, there was no limit on what a farm could produce. This open market would eventually oversupply the needs reducing the price paid and forcing growers out of the industry. In 1920 growers received $0.44 a pound, record prices at the time, and by 1925 the prices reduced to $0.25 a pound (Chart 3) a forty three percent decrease (USDA, 2018). Also, after a record number of acres were planted in 1921 acres diminished by sixty percent in 1935 to just over sixteen thousand acres of tobacco (USDA, 2018).

![Chart 3: Price paid per pound of tobacco in Connecticut and Massachusetts from 1900-1940](image)
Cigar popularity had lasted for quite a long time, but by the mid-1920’s cigarettes were becoming more popular reducing the need for the Connecticut River Valley tobacco. Finally, The Great Depression disrupted the entire country. The Great Depression resulted in the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Acts of 1933 and 1938 which created quotas on the number of Broadleaf and Havana Seed tobacco acres (Grise, 1988). Interestingly, Connecticut Shade tobacco was the only type of tobacco that was not governed under this act, as a result the number of Connecticut Shade tobacco acres slightly increased shortly after this act was established (USDA, 2018).
Marketing Strategies from 1940-1980

The early 1940’s showed a steady decline in tobacco acres when farmland was being sold off for commercial use, tobacco growers were offered inflated prices for their open, level ground. In 1941 fifteen-hundred acres of tobacco ground was sold in order to build a United States Air Force Base, which would eventually become Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks, CT. The average sales price for land at the end of the 1930’s was between $30 and $33 per acre. The fifteen-hundred acres of tobacco farmland sold for $250,000 (Church, 2014), or $167 per acre, five times higher than the average price. At this point tobacco acres were half of what they were just twenty years earlier. The tobacco growers in the region saw another increase in their market when the United States entered World War II, but this brought its own unique set of challenges. Also, in 1941, growers in the Connecticut River Valley formed the Connecticut Valley Shade Tobacco Growers Association (Dunlap, 2016), which was used not only to help market tobacco but would eventually be used to overcome the challenges brought on by the war and help to change labor laws in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

In 1943 the United State’s War Food Administration categorized tobacco as essential as ammunition in the war effort because it was seen as a way to build morale with the troops fighting overseas (Dunlap, 2016). This policy caused a dramatic shift in tobacco production in the region. Farms that never stopped production of tobacco increased the acres that they were normally producing and growers that had retired from the industry started to produce tobacco again. Buyers were purchasing as much tobacco as the growers could produce and growers were receiving three times the price in 1945 than they were just five years earlier (USDA, 2018). All the acres of
tobacco meant that more labor would be needed to produce the crop but the men who would normally have worked in the fields were now fighting in World War II.

With tobacco being sold at record prices, $0.92 per pound (USDA, 2018), and a demand that had not been seen in over twenty years these family growers were not going to let this opportunity pass them by. Wives and other women of the communities entered not only the manufacturing workforce but also the agricultural workforce. The Connecticut Valley Shade Tobacco Growers Association would soon step in to help with developing a plan to overcome the labor shortage. The Association was soon recruiting college students, both male and females, from the southern states (Normen, 2016). The Association built new housing for the migrant workers, and also kept their kitchens stocked with food while they were working the tobacco fields. With the booming tobacco industry, it was not long until there were not enough people to bus here from the south and soon labor was brought in from Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the West Indies.

The tobacco production demands due to World War II continued until around 1950 when just over twenty-seven thousand acres were planted in the Connecticut River Valley (USDA, 2018). In 1953 the homogenized tobacco leaf was invented and destroyed the market for the region. The homogenized tobacco leaf was a manufactured leaf that was made up of scraps and poorer tobacco leaves, adhesive and flavoring was added to the other material to make a new wrapper. This new technique made it much cheaper and faster to make cigars. By 1960 there was a fifty-five percent reduction in tobacco acres (Chart 4) compared to ten years earlier. There was a bright side to the homogenized tobacco leaf though, because the growers always focused on the quality of their product the cigars that were still made with the Connecticut River Valley leaf were sold at even more of a premium. From 1955 to 1990 the price per pound steadily increased.
Prior to the 1960’s the Connecticut River Valley tobacco grower’s main competitor were Cuban growers. This competition came to a halt on October 19, 1960 because the Cuban government took control of American owned oil refineries that were located in Cuba. The Cuban government nationalized many businesses that were owned by United States companies so the United States government extended the Cuban Embargo that was already in place. The embargo halted trade with Cuba making it difficult for the Cuban tobacco growers to distribute their own tobacco (Fabry, 2015). The embargo did not create an increase in acres for the valley growers but accounted for another increase in the price they received for their tobacco.

The mid 1960’s through the 1970’s brought a combination of higher labor costs and the first Surgeon General’s warning in 1964 (CDC, 2006) caused more growers in the region to either
sell their land, reduce the acres of tobacco that they were initially growing, or make a capital investment and start to focus on different vegetable crops. This started a stretch of the longest down turn that these tobacco growers and their families had ever seen. As many growers left the industry some growers were continuing to grow the crop because of nostalgia, generations of their family grew tobacco on the same land and they could not give up their passion to produce it. The larger growers were able to stay in business because they were much more efficient than the three to five-acre grower.

Of the growers that were interviewed two of them started growing their own tobacco during this time period. Both growers stated that everything in the industry is the same except for the number of people buying the tobacco. There was much less concern of being able to sell their crop when they first started planting because there were more people available to purchase it than there are today.

None of the buyers interviewed were actually purchasing tobacco during this period so they passed on the question.
Marketing Strategies from 1980-Present

In the early 1980’s tobacco acres were continuing their steady decline following the World War II boom. Tobacco acres eventually leveled off around 1990 at around twenty-five hundred acres (USDA, 2018) (Chart 5). One reason for the decline in acres was due to the removal of The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1939, which set quotas for growers growing cigar binder varieties of tobacco, like the Broadleaf tobacco and Havana Seed tobacco, from 1938 until 1983. The Congressional Act set quotas on the number of acres produced per region. The Dairy and Tobacco Adjustment Act of 1983 ended the use of quotas for cigar binder tobacco (Grise, 1988). With the quotas removed it became an open market again in the Connecticut River Valley. The removal of the quota system affected two of the growers that were interviewed, their buyer that normally purchased their tobacco to no longer wanted Havana Seed tobacco, so they switched their operations to growing only the Broadleaf tobacco. This quota removal was the major reason for the decline in tobacco acres during the 1980’s. What helped tobacco growers through the 1980’s was that the price per pound (Chart 6) was increasing (USDA, 2018). By 1990 New England tobacco growers were receiving one hundred and fifty percent more for their entire crop on sixty percent less acres compared to fifteen years prior.

In the early 2000’s tobacco prices started to rebound because high quality cigars started to become popular again. Prices gradually started to increase but before long plateaued and eventually started to decrease as there was an oversupply of cigar binder tobacco. The leveling off of the price per pound and eventual fall of the price was the reason for the most recent decline in tobacco acres.
Of the growers who were interviewed, eighty-seven percent of them started growing tobacco during this time period, and all but one of them had a prior generation of their family that grew tobacco. Of the eighty-seven percent of the growers who started producing tobacco during this time period, twenty percent started in the 1980’s, forty-seven percent started in the 1990’s, and thirty-three percent started in the 2000’s.

All of the growers interviewed grew tobacco at some point from 1980 until the present, the questions asked that are relevant to this time period were questions one, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and twelve. The questions asked were used to determine what types of tobacco they
were currently growing and why, they may not be growing a different type of tobacco. Other questions were used to examine if they once grew a different type of tobacco and what may have caused them to no longer grow them? Also, questions focused on how their tobacco is sold, and how that has changed, as well as managing risk with a crop that has high investment costs.

Chart 6: Price paid per pound of tobacco in Connecticut and Massachusetts from 1940-1990

The relevant question for buyers were numbers three, four, five, seven, nine, and ten for the time period of 1980 until the present. The questions focused on the types of tobacco they have purchased and are currently purchasing, and in what percentages of each. How and where these different varieties are sold and how events like the Congressional Act affected the market.
Question three for the growers was determining what types of tobacco are currently being grown. All of the growers are currently growing Broadleaf tobacco, twenty percent are growing Connecticut Shade tobacco, and twenty percent were growing Havana Seed tobacco. One hundred percent of the interviewees grew a certain type of tobacco because that is what the buyers were looking for, while thirteen percent also said that they grow a specific type because they have experience with it as well as the high capital investment needed has already been made by previous generations. Finally, the growers that had made the high capital investment needed to grow Connecticut Shade tobacco was a group of growers, twenty percent, that were growing a specific type to maintain a marketing advantage.

Question four asked if the growers have ever grown a different type of tobacco than they currently grow and twenty percent of the respondents did grow a different type of tobacco during the 1980’s and 1990’s. Two thirds of the growers were growing Havana Seed tobacco until 1986 when their normal buyer came to them in the spring and stated that they were no longer interested in buying the Havana Seed tobacco. The growers mentioned that there was an oversupply at the time, which could have been an effect of the Dairy and Tobacco Adjustment Act of 1983 which removed quotas on acres grown. The open market may have oversupplied Havana Seed tobacco forcing some growers to start producing Broadleaf tobacco instead. The last one third of growers stopped growing the Connecticut Shade type tobacco because they were concerned about the market moving forward. It is important to note that one group was forced to stop growing one type because there may not be anyone to buy it and the second group ceased growing a type based off of their own personal decisions.

Question five was asked to determine why growers have not tried growing a different type of tobacco. Eighty percent of the growers said they have not grown Connecticut Shade type
because of the capital investments needed in order to grow the crop. One grower stated that all of the ground that they use is rented, and they would have concerns getting the long-term leases needed in order to make the capital investments. They felt it would only be worthwhile to make the investment if they owned the land. Growers gave other reasons for not growing the Connecticut Shade type such as the concerns with the added labor they would need, and the concerns with plant disease, specifically Blue Mold. In regards to the Havana Seed tobacco, the response from all the growers was that the buyers were not looking for it, or that the buyers have never asked them to grow any.

The next question, number six, was asked in order to examine how the growers in the region actually market their tobacco crop. Growers were asked if they were using contracts, and if they are, do the contracts stipulate the number of acres or pounds of tobacco to be grown or harvested? If the growers are not using contracts, is the tobacco wholesaled to a buyer or buyers, or direct marketed it to a cigar maker? None of the growers interviewed were currently contracting their tobacco to a buyer, although a very small percentage of them had used a contract at least once in the past. The growers felt that if they signed a contract and locked in a price for their tobacco, they may lose money because they could potentially get more money per pound latter because of the quality of tobacco they were producing. Every grower was taking a chance though, their normal buyer may say that they will buy the tobacco in the fall but there is no guarantee that they will. Every grower wholesaled their entire crop to one or two buyers. The growers who chose to elaborate on why they did not direct market their tobacco to local cigar shops mentioned that it would not be possible. Their concern was that the local shops would only want the best leaves, and possibly a portion of the other better leaves. Their concern is in regard to, what they would do with the rest of the crop. By wholesaling the crop to one or two buyers they are able to sell all
of the leaves and stemming. Most of the growers have long-term relationships with the buyers in
the area as well, and they did not want to do anything to affect that relationship because it might
present a problem for selling their crop in the future. Eighty percent of the growers were selling
to at least one of the three buyers in the area. The remaining twenty percent of growers did not
want to go into much detail about whom they sell their crop to, and limited their response to selling
to someone different than other growers in the region, and that their marketing strategy goes back
multiple generations.

The marketing strategy that the Connecticut River Valley tobacco growers currently use is
the same that they have used throughout the time that they have grown tobacco as well as the
generations before them. This is a concern for some of the growers because of the money they
have invested in their crop, $6,800-$12,000 per acre for Broadleaf and Havana Seed tobaccos and
much higher, up to $30,000 per acre (Wolfe Boynton, 2007), for the Connecticut Shade tobacco
with the capital investments and added labor costs, because there is the potential that they will
need to sell at a discounted price in order to cover expenses. Other growers had no concerns with
the way they market their tobacco and therefore their marketing strategies has not changed, mainly
because their crop has continually been sold each year.

The buyers who were interviewed tended to pass on more of the questions that were asked
about this time period. For example, none of the buyers interviewed wanted to answer questions
three or four about what types of tobacco that they were purchasing as well as what percentage of
the tobacco purchased was Broadleaf, Havana Seed, and Connecticut Shade tobaccos.

Only one of the buyers interviewed felt that the Dairy and Tobacco Adjustment Act of
1983 had a slight effect on the tobacco growers in the region. They do not believe it was the reason
for the decrease in tobacco acres but potentially a reason for the reduction in Havana Seed acres planted. The decline in acres in the 1980’s through 1990’s was more due to advanced age of the growers and retirement. The other buyers interviewed were not working in the industry at the time so had abstained input on the question.

The buyers all had the same response to the remaining question that pertain to this time period, all of the tobacco that they purchase in New England is eventually sold in the Dominican Republic usually after one year of curing. Although this has recently changed because of the current demand for the tobacco. The tobacco is being shipped to the end user after only two or three months of curing. The buyers believe that this will change back to the original process once the market is saturated.
Future Strategies for Marketing Tobacco

The future strategies for the tobacco growers was extrapolated from questions ten, eleven, fourteen, and fifteen. These questions were asked to determine where they thought the direction of the market might be going, what plans did they have in place to adjust to a changing market, what would cause them to leave the industry, and if they were developing other markets with different crops in order to spread out their risks.

Going forward, a majority of the southern New England tobacco growers do not see a change occurring in the way they market their tobacco. The growers that wish to continue to grow tobacco plan to plant their crop in the spring with the hopes that someone will purchase it after it has been harvested. They understand the risks involved when they plant, including the fact that it may not necessarily be sold to the original intended buyer, or for the price that they may have originally discussed. There were twenty percent of the tobacco growers who had recently started selling to multiple buyers and felt that was a good strategy and that they would continue that in the future. Also, while only thirteen percent of the growers interviewed had used signed contracts in the spring, twenty percent said that they may consider using contracts in the future to help minimize some risk. Nearly half of the growers that said they may use contracts going forward but mentioned stipulations would need to be in the contract if they were to sign one, they did not say what the stipulations should be. There was also a clear difference of how growers would market their tobacco depending on the type of tobacco that they were growing.

In regards to the question of what would cause the grower to leave the industry, twenty seven percent of the reasons were if they were losing money growing the crop. Of all the growers
that stated that they would stop growing tobacco if they were losing money, seventy five percent of them answered the question of what it cost them to produce an acre of the crop. The low cost was $6,800 and the highest cost was $12,000. The remaining seventy-three percent of growers that did not state “losing money” as a reason to leave the industry either did not know what it cost them to produce an acre of tobacco or passed on answering the question. Nearly half, forty-seven percent, of the growers stated “retirement” as a reason for leaving the industry. The growers interviewed had been growing the tobacco from five years to fifty-one years with an average of thirty-three years. Another eighteen percent of responses stated that “low prices” would cause them to stop growing tobacco, but there was not a specific price that the price per pound would need to fall under. Finally, nine percent of respondents stated weather as a reason to stop growing tobacco, and there was more of a concern with climate change. Overall, growers gave multiple reasons for why they would leave the industry.

The fourteenth question in the interview asked the grower what their biggest concern was moving forward, this referred to actually growing of the crop and not what might cause them to stop growing the crop. All of the respondents were very adamant that their main focus was producing a high-quality product as long as they are growing. Their feelings were that if they could not produce a high-quality crop, they would not get the top prices needed to cover their high production costs. The idea of quality being the main focus of growers is evident when yield per acre is analyzed. Going back to 1866, the yield of the tobacco grown in New England had its best year in 1910 when on average 1,781.3 pounds of tobacco were harvested per acre, while the lowest year was 1925 when 1,326.7 pounds of tobacco were harvested per acre (USDA, 2018). Although the high and low years of tobacco production per acre were only fifteen years apart, the rest of the yields over the one-hundred-and-fifty-year time period fell into that 454.6-pound range (Chart 7).
When growers were told about the tobacco yields, they were all very surprised, but when they thought about their own operation, yields, and the quality tobacco they were trying to produce it was more evident. Fifty percent of the answers to question fourteen, what concerns do the growers have growing future tobacco crops, were being able to produce a high-quality tobacco crop. Of the growers that stated quality concerns, fifty percent had disease concerns, specifically Blue Mold, and the other fifty percent had concerns about the weather and climate change. Fifteen percent of answers to question fourteen would be to a reduction in the current market specifically in the amount needed to sustain the market, while another fifteen percent were concerned with the government and government regulations. Labor was the response eight percent of the time.

Chart 7: Harvested pounds of tobacco per acre from 1866-2015
The final question was asked in order to determine if they are growing other crops to spread their risk. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents were growing other crops with the idea of risk management. Some other reasons given for producing other crops were labor management and profit margin. Tobacco growers felt that growing tobacco would allow them to keep some of their good labor they use for their other crops. Also, one interviewee stated that they actually have better profit margins on some of their other crops that they grow. Finally, one tobacco grower, that grows multiple crops said, “Tobacco has been the only crop that has allowed us to purchase land, no other crop that we grow can pay for the land that it is grown on.”

The buyers of the tobacco were also asked question on their feelings of the future of Connecticut River Valley tobacco. All the tobacco buyers felt that the price would be very good in the near future but it was only a matter of time, once the market is saturated it will deflate the current prices. The buyers were unsure how long the demand would last, but they said that they have never seen such demand as they are currently witnessing. The buyers of the tobacco feel that when the next decline in price occurs more growers will leave the industry, even if the price is not below their cost of production.

Going forward buyers also stated that they were looking for the highest quality tobacco, quality played more of a role in the tobacco grown in the New England region than any other tobacco that they purchased from other parts of the country. After the conversations about tobacco quality, the interviewer asked about tobacco yields in the southern United Stated where there are some other varieties of tobacco being grown including; Burley, Fire Cured, or Flue Cured tobaccos. There response was that they have seen steady increases in yield with the southern varieties, and have not seen increases with the New England types that they were purchasing.
When they were told that yields of the New England types have been consistent going back to 1866 there was some surprise but eventual realization about quality concerns.

Ultimately, buyers of the Connecticut River Valley tobacco said that it is the one crop that they do not have specific acreage contracts for like in other parts of the country. They will sometimes offer a contract in the spring to lock in a price that they will pay, but they have never and probably will never offer contracts to limit the amount of tobacco that a farm can grow. Their general feeling is that the tobacco growers have policed their open market for the past three hundred plus years and it is up to them to continue to do so.
Summary & Conclusion

The tobacco acres planted in New England have only accounted for about one tenth of the total acres of tobacco plant in the United States. Even in 1921 when acres peaked in the region at over forty-one thousand acres it was only two tenths of a percent of the total acres in the country (USDA, 2018). During the early Twentieth Century there was no other industry that was contributing more to the economy in the region than tobacco. It was not just the salaries from the labor they were paying, but tobacco growers were hiring builders to raise new sheds to store the tobacco in, new companies were started to supply large quantities of cheesecloth for the shade tents, and fertilizer technologies were studied in the area to better learn how to grow a crop with high nutrient demands like tobacco.

The Connecticut River Valley tobacco growers were always trying to stay ahead of their competition, for example trying the different types of tobacco or techniques like the shade tents. The growers understood that because of the niche crop that they were growing they needed to try these things but in no way could they sacrifice the quality of the product they were growing. There was always a willingness to change their production methods but it appears one thing that never changed was how the growers actually marketed their crop. Growers today are not only selling tobacco the same way that generations before them did, but in many cases the same families are purchasing the tobacco. There is concern with this scenario, but with the lack of contracts and high cost of production many growers are unwilling to discuss the issue with the chance that their tobacco market might be lost the following year.
The growers in the region are trying to satisfy a small portion of the tobacco market, while the other tobacco markets in the United States are using contracts to control the acres grown and the price paid per pound the cigar binder and cigar wrapper markets are open markets. It is up to the growers in the region to control their own market, although they have flooded the market at times and managed through declining prices, it still remains open. There are enough growers that move in and out of the industry as prices rise and fall. There are contracts available to growers but a very low percentage of them actually use them, they feel they are better off taking the chances growing the crop with no guarantee that a buyer will be willing to purchase their tobacco in the fall. The idea that they may not be able to sell their crop at the end of the year weighs on them especially with the high cost of production, but it is a chance that they are willing to take, it was a chance that their parents were willing to take, and their grandparents as well in some cases.

This niche crop has contributed greatly to the surrounding area, in 2012 tobacco accounted for less than a half of a percent of crop land acres in Connecticut but was the fifth highest grossing crop in the state (USDA, 2012). New England tobacco is also where the co-operative banking systems like Farm Credit started, as well as county crop extension office. The Connecticut Experiment Station is not only responsible for the first soil conservation work in the country, but it also contributed one of the parents to the first hybrid corn. The labor that worked the tobacco fields in New England, which included Martin Luther King Jr. for two years (Dunlap, 2016), is partially responsible for the diverse racial and ethnic communities in the Greater Hartford and Springfield areas. Tobacco is a crop that although appears out of place in New England, found a niche and contributed greatly to the community.
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Anonymous grower #5. Phone Interview. January 12, 2019

Anonymous grower #6. Phone Interview. January 14, 2019

Anonymous grower #7. Phone Interview. January 14, 2019

Anonymous grower #8. Phone Interview. January 14, 2019


Anonymous grower #11. Phone Interview. February 12, 2019

Anonymous grower #12. Phone Interview. February 13, 2019
Anonymous grower #13. Phone Interview. February 13, 2019

Anonymous grower #14. Phone Interview. February 13, 2019

Anonymous grower #15. Phone Interview. February 21, 2019


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Connecticut Valley Tobacco Museum, 135 Lang Road; Windsor, CT


Appendix

A. Photograph from outside shade tenting that covers a field of Connecticut Shade tobacco.

Photograph courtesy of Peter Kesselburgh
B. Photograph from underneath the shade tenting while in a field of Connecticut Shade tobacco.

Photograph courtesy of Peter Kimmelburgh
C. Photograph of tobacco fields and tobacco sheds.

Photograph courtesy of Peter Kisselburgh
D. Table showing the income from tobacco and the 2018 value of the income from 1866-1990.

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E. Table showing the average price per pound growers received from 1866-1990.

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