

GIRLS ON A TOBACCO FARM

[This article was sent in to us by a reader who has just come back to town—unwillingly, we gather—after a month or so on a tobacco farm. The farmers are short of workers, and B.H.B. feels that if more people knew just what fun life on a tobacco farm can be the growers would no longer need to complain of the labour shortage.]

YOU could not find a happier crowd anywhere — a dozen, laughing, sun-tanned girls, with scarcely a care in the world. Not even the rapidly-approaching danger of war can break through the peaceful serenity of this country life. Nor can distant storm clouds detract from the pleasure of an eagerly-awaited cup of tea.

Out here on this tobacco farm, life is so simple—there is work to be done, and we do it. There is neither the time nor the need to stop and wonder why, to be discontented or quarrelsome. Indeed, we are all so contented, and spoilt by our employers, that even the Trade Union collector realises he is not an essential!

Gossip And Humourist

Do you know any of the others? The little one over there in the overalls is one of the most active links in what we call the "Pangatotara Post." Watch her bright little birdlike eyes sparkle as she rolls the latest gossip over her tongue. "Good golly mees," she says, "whatcha think I 'eard last night. . . ." If we listen long enough we'll know all that has happened in the valley within the last few weeks. Imagine this happening among workers all the way up the valley, and there you have the "Pangatotara Post."

You see the tall girl with black hair and pink cheeks? She keeps us laughing all day with her delightfully innocent remarks. She is never cross or nasty in any way, and is full of the most unconscious wit.

The Season Starts

I'd better begin by giving you a brief sketch of the stages in tobacco growing. The season starts about September or October with the pricking out of the plants into boxes. Then, when the seedlings are large enough, they are planted out in the fields—one person digs the holes, and another drops in the tiny plants. By December they are ready for hoeing. The cultivator loosens the soil between the rows, but each plant must be hoed around separately. All day long the workers toil up and down the rows, bending down to pull out a weed here, to kill a grub there. Then comes lateralling.

Ah, this is where we start. Now, each one takes two rows. The best way is to crawl along on your hands and knees. Start at the bottom of the plant and work upwards, taking out all the



Hoeing round the plants

laterals in the axils of the leaves. And take off those little yellow sand bugs round the bottom, too. They are no good. Yes, that's right. By doing two rows, every other row is left free for the pickers.

After the lateralling comes topping—as the plant flowers, the top must be picked off, because if a flower drops on to a leaf it burns it, leaving a yellow scorch mark. This lowers the grade of the leaf.

Meanwhile the bottom leaves are ready for harvesting. The men, if there are any, pick the leaves, leaving them in piles in the rows, while the girls pick them up and put them into bins. When a bin is full it is carted off to the kiln, where another team is at work. There the leaves are put in twos and handed to someone who ties them on manuka sticks, which are then loaded in a kiln, holding, usually, about 750 sticks.

A Race at the Kiln

Kiln days are perhaps the most fun. There are usually two or three stands going at once—a stand consisting of a bin of leaves, and a wooden horse, where the leaves are tied on to the sticks; two, three or four girls to hand the leaves and one to tie. The faster the tier the more girls she needs to hand to her. Bin after bin comes in from the field, stick after stick goes up into the kiln; it is a race from start to finish, a race to get done before five o'clock. And there's the continuous accompaniment of gay banter and singing.

Once the kiln is loaded, the leaves must be dried. Huge fires are lit in the furnaces underneath, and the temperature is raised from 75 degrees F to 95 degrees F, and gradually to 175 degrees F. This takes about five days, depending on the ripeness and the colour of the leaf. A ripe green leaf, when dried, becomes a beautiful golden colour. The kiln is then allowed to cool, and water is poured over the floor to moisten the leaf, so that it does not crack when moved. When the tobacco has "come back," and is soft and yellow like chamois leather, it is unloaded and



Tying leaves at the kiln

bulked. There it is pressed down ready for the grading in April and May.

During the Winter

All the leaves as they ripen are harvested in this way until only the bare stalks, shoulder high, remain in the fields.

Love And Language

"YOU'RE corks, kid," the young man said.
 "I'll say," the fair girl made reply.
 "Your beauty would light up the shed."
 "Too right!" she smiled and winked an eye.
 "When we are wed, my dear," he said,
 "We'll milk a herd of sixty-three,
 A bosker mob, all Jersey bred—"
 "Oh, that'll be the day!" flashed she.

—J. A. Walsh

The winter months are spent in the big sheds, grading and blending the tobacco ready to be sent to the factories.

Then, at last, the farmer's work is done for the season, just in time to have a week or two of rest before starting again with the pricking out.

A typical day in a tobacco worker's life? Let me see. We all live in baches, three, four, or even five in each. Get up at six, have breakfast, start work at seven, sometimes eight. Lunch from twelve to one, then work again till five or six. You can usually please yourself how long you work, but sometimes, when work is urgent, as on kiln days, you are expected to go on a little longer. Work over, some rush home to light the stove, and get the dinner on, some to collect mail and milk, some to dig potatoes or gather wood. Dinner is seldom ready before seven or eight o'clock, and after dinner, bed. That's perhaps the chief joy of the tobacco picker's life—sleep after a day's hard work.

I wonder what the time is. Five o'clock already! Don't you wish you could stay and work here, instead of going back to town? I thought you would.

—B.H.B.

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