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Tobacco Dinner

Anyone who has spent a day "working in tobacco" in South Georgia wouldn't choose to go back; anyone who has stuck his feet beneath a long plank table for a tobacco dinner would at the first drop of an invitation.

But you have to work first. Rising in the chilled dawn, you would be loaded like so many shoats on the back of a pickup for the jolting excursion over rutted fields to the sweltering day. A day strumming with crickets and surrounded by endless rows of rank tobacco and the grumbling of yawning barnhands beneath the shed of the seasoned tobacco barn.

I'm told that the most arduous tasks are performed in the fields, between the rows of head-high plants, by the croppers. A wide space between the rows, running in fours, is left bare for the tractor and sled to plod. These are called sled rows, one word when spoken in south Georgia dialect: sledrow.

Never did I volunteer, nor was I drafted, to crop the abrasive sandlugs at the base of the stalks or the leathery top leaves, which could cover my childback. I was a hander, slow and plodding, like the softly rattling wood^Nsled struggling against the tow of the tractor. I counted my two leaves to a hand for the zippy, smart-mouthed stringers to earn my two dollars a day in the Fifties, waiting for dinnertime.

Washing up at the watershelf on the back porch of the farmer's house, to the hum and click of the water pump, the workers waited in line - handers last. If you listened above the excited chatter of the workers, you could hear the tin roof ticking from the hot sun at its noon peak. Inhaling, you could smell the sour mud from the gully, flanked by purple hydrangeas and scarlet prince's feathers, off the edge of the porch where our wash-water ran.

But the efficient clanks and clatters, emanating from the kitchen through the screen door, promised you would forget the morning, the tobacco tar gluing your pants to your legs, tar clinging to your hands and the tops of your bare feet.

No one entered that lye-scrubbed porch with shoes on, out of courtesy for those women who had risen with the sun to gather and grate the fresh corn for creaming. Select spears of okra had been cut from the prickly stalks in the kitchen garden out back, sliced and fried in coats of corn meal, some stewed whole in a mixture of speckled butterbeans and field peas. Squash, likewise, was fried and stewed - take your pick, or both. And don't bother with amenities: you're field hands, tired, hot, hungry and excusable. Here, have another sliced tomato from the platter of red pinwheels!

The farmer's wife and his mother - oftentimes assisted by daughters too shrewd or too peaked for the fields - served with

alacrity the fragrant food, scents drifting to the back porch, through the open hall to the front porch and out to the freshly raked yards. In tidy aprons and soft frayed cotton dresses, they replenished empty serving bowls and iced tea glasses.

The tea was the sweetest branch-water black tea I've ever had the courage to drink. My years of unselfconscious overindulgence in food are marked at that half-way point by my last glass of such sweet, deeply bitter brewed tea.

When you felt you could not eat another wedge of ~~homemade~~ buttermilk cornbread, long pans (they called them waiters) of pear pies were shoved toward you: steaming and tart, with a crazed crust.

Too full to plod, you were shuttled back to the barn and a day as endless as the tobacco rows.