

VIRGINIA LIVING

FASHION

NEW LOOKS
FOR THE
OLD BELT

No other crop is linked with Virginia's history as closely as tobacco. Ever since the Jamestown settlers discovered that exporting tobacco back to England was a lucrative line of business, the crop has defined Virginia's agricultural industry. From the early fields in Jamestown, the production of tobacco spread west across the state, along the rivers and rail lines. Eventually, a region known as "The Old Belt," in southern Virginia and northern North Carolina, began growing some of the finest tobacco in the world—named "Brightleaf," produced through a double-curing process in which the leaves are hit with a second blast of high heat while drying.

South Boston was the epicenter of the Old Belt—and from 1935 to 1941, the little town (population 5,000 or so) hosted the National Tobacco Festival. Drawing some 160,000 people by its final year, the festival was a three-day extravaganza with parades, tobacco-themed plays, dances and more. Pretty girls marched around dressed up as cigarettes and tobacco leaves. At the center of it all was a beauty pageant governed by the tobacco festival "queen." They were not just local girls: Emra Majera, the tobacco queen of 1938, was the daughter of the Mexican ambassador to America. Silent film star Mary Pickford led the festival as queen in 1939. Says Lucy Conner, a tobacco farmer in Halifax County, "It was big-time, back before the war—they had movie stars here and big bands. We wish we had been here during those times."

Also during the festival, local landmarks such as Berry Hill plantation were opened to the public. The Greek Revival mansion, built between 1833 and 1840 by James Cole Bruce, is on the site of an earlier 1770 mansion. Before the Civil War, the lands at Berry Hill produced wheat, corn and, of course, tobacco—production was estimated to be "more than a million hills of tobacco" a year, according to the official Berry Hill history. With high ceilings, hardwood floors, a stunning double staircase and expansive lands, the plantation is the epitome of Old Southern grandeur.

The National Tobacco Festival was suspended during WWII, then soon moved to Richmond. It was canceled in 1984 due to rising production costs and decreased interest.

The last two decades have been hard on the U.S. tobacco industry, of course. One reason is that smoking is a health hazard, so social attitudes toward the industry have changed. There are also economic realities; nowadays, more tobacco is grown in India and Brazil than in America, because it's

Odd Molly pieced and embroidered long dress (\$278) from Heidi Story, Richmond. Frankie Slaughter mixed bead necklace (\$135) from FrankieSlaughter.com

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cheaper. And in 2004, the U.S. government ended its tobacco price-support program, dealing a serious blow to growers. South Boston and its surrounding areas have felt the effects. In 1997, 8,456 acres in Halifax County were devoted to tobacco; by 2007, that number had fallen to 2,928 acres.

The area isn't letting go of its tobacco traditions, however. For one thing, about 309 farms in Halifax County, which includes South Boston, still grow tobacco, most in combination with other crops. The Prizery, South Boston's community and fine arts center, is home to a permanent exhibit on the town's past as the home of the National Tobacco Festival. As Linda Wallace, director of Agricultural Development for Halifax County, puts it, "I do believe that tobacco will remain as one of our primary crops," although the area is branching out into vineyards, cattle and vegetable production to ensure a diversified harvest. In addition, the Halifax County Heritage and Antique Machinery Festival, held the first weekend in May every year, celebrates the farming traditions of the area. Lucy Conner

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says that some of the activities are "molasses making, threshing wheat the old-fashioned way, grinding corn and displaying old cars and tractors," because, she says, "some of the younger generations have never seen lots of these things." Berry Hill, after languishing for several years, is now a resort that evokes the plantation's history while offering modern comforts to guests.

These photos, taken at Berry Hill and in a South Boston tobacco field, are a contemporary twist on Virginia's tobacco tradition. We add more than a splash of bright colors and bold patterns to an era that was black and white, while staying true to the area's farming history. What other excuse do we need for putting work boots on a fashion model?

—ANNE-RYAN HEATWOLE

More at Prizery.com. Special thanks to Jim Crawford, producer and director of Down in the Old Belt: Voices from the Tobacco South for lending us his documentary on the history of tobacco in southern Virginia (SwingingGateProductions.com). Also thanks to Berry Hill Plantation Resort (BerryHillEstate.com) and the organizers of the Halifax County Heritage and Antique Machinery Festival; Linda Wallace at the Halifax County Agriculture Office; Tom Hundley and Tom West for use of their tractors; model Nicole Boerner of Modelogic; Wilhelmina, and Michelle Torres for hair and make-up.



TOBACCO IMAGES FROM 1938 NATIONAL TOBACCO FESTIVAL, HALIFAX. COURTESY OF WHTJ AND SWINGING GATE PRODUCTIONS



Alice + Olivia black and white butterfly dress (\$396) from Georgie, Charlottesville. Rock Band snakeskin bracelet (\$225) from Shirtfresh, Richmond. Frankie Slaughter brown, black and orange bead necklace (\$185) from FrankieSlaughter.com/Richmond. Citrine sterling ring (\$198) from The Phoenix, Richmond. Pink space dye wrap (\$38) from Heidi Story, Richmond.

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Frankie Slaughter Admiralty Station coat (\$750) from FrankieSlaughter.com. Prairie purple cotton dress (\$210) from Saks Fifth Avenue, Richmond.

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