

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Jon Christopher Brown

COLLECTION: 4700.1367

IDENTIFICATION: Perique tobacco marketer, ethnobotanist.

INTERVIEWER: Persephone Hintlian

PROJECT: Perique Tobacco

INTERVIEW DATES: August 29, 2000

FOCUS DATES: 1990s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 1991, Side A

Born December 3, 1949 in Jersey City, New Jersey; father was policeman, mother a commercial artist; parents' education; father flew spotter plane for the artillery in World War Two; younger brother Mark, a mechanic, lives in Vermont; early education; high school at Montclair Academy, a preparatory school; learned resourcefulness from grandfather, who was a mechanic; inspired by grandmother, who taught him to cook; worked ten years between high school and college at various jobs; studied botany at University of Massachusetts, Boston; BS in 1984; worked and traveled for a few years, then started graduate school at University of Massachusetts, Amherst; got M.S. in botany in 1992; finishing Ph.D. in biology at Tulane; dissertation on plants of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in Campeche, Mexico; trip to St. James Parish with friend Matt to learn about Perique tobacco; stopped at local restaurant to get information on Perique farmers; visited Percy Martin, last full time Perique farmer; Perique is difficult to grow, very dependent on weather, easy to lose money on a crop; feeling that Perique was grossly underpriced compared to other specialty tobacco on market; Brown decided to help Martin find alternate markets that paid better; description of amount of hand tending required; comparison to other specialty products, like champagne and caviar; Martin more a farmer than businessman, lack of interest in retailing to specialty individuals who would pay higher price for small amounts; Brown and his friend Matt decide to go into business with Martin, helping him market Perique and hoping to save Perique culture; rules surrounding sale, taxing, and manufacturing of tobacco; chain of production, from raw to retail tobacco; pitching Martin's Perique to European tobacco blenders; difficulties breaking into tobacco business; negotiating prices with European tobacco blenders; reluctance to disclose prices for record; eventually managed to double the price Martin originally got for Perique; Brown's efforts to find buyers after he bought several barrels of Perique from Martin; selling small quantities to individuals; import company in New Orleans got interested in selling Perique.

Tape 1991, Side B

Mayan Import Company in New Orleans began to promote Perique; front page *Times Picayune* story on Perique; newspaper story gave them credibility overnight; successful ongoing deal with

Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company, makers of American Spirit; plans to increase production; possibility of Perique cigars; interest from other companies; increased cost of diesel driving price of Perique up; planning the slow expansion of Perique crop; plans for increased advertising, improved webpage; Brown more interested in wholesale than retail; Perique will never be the crop it once was, as agricultural land in St. James Parish has decreased; amount of Perique farms can yield; hand labor will keep price up; must compete on quality, not price; people who complain about the high price.

TAPES: 1 (T1991)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 17 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 40 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Gift agreement, Correspondence

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