

Letter to the editor, *Sampson Independent* (Clinton, N.C.), March 2007:

On James Williams:

Do a job often enough, for long enough, and the whole experience compresses into a single memory. The summers I spent working on my grandparents' tobacco farm in Harrells seem, 15 years later, like one very long day of suckering plants, packing bulk barns and grading sheet after sheet of cured tobacco. My two cousins and I began helping out on the farm as soon as we were old enough to be useful, and we sweated through every summer there until my grandparents retired when I was 17. Among the couple dozen other people we worked with in the fields and at the barns was James Williams. No one else was more crucial to the harvest.

My grandfather's only year-round employee, James drove the big tractors—a rust-tinged John Deere 2940 with a cracked seat and a slippery clutch, and an enclosed, air-conditioned 4030. He made sure the tobacco trailers got where they were going, that the tobacco boxes didn't get packed too tight, and that the rest of us kept pace with the harvesters in the field. If something needed lifting, James lifted it. If something broke, he fixed it. During the feverish late-summer weeks when we rushed to get the ripe leaves off the stalks before the sun scorched them, James's demeanor—steady, purposeful, soft-spoken—helped keep the rest of us from sliding into chaos.

James died last month when a space heater in his living room overloaded an extension cord and his mobile home caught fire. He was 55. My grandparents called to give me the news the next day. A week or so later, I dug up a handful of photographs taken on the farm around 1990. They are the only pictures I have from the summers I spent there, and in them James is unloading trailers, piloting tractors, tagging sheets of graded tobacco and muscling them into the back of my grandfather's truck. He's wearing the dark pants and greasy cap he always wore, his paper-thin shirt unbuttoned to his sternum. In none of the photographs is he standing still.

Work meant something to James. It was as natural and necessary as waking up in the morning or going to bed at night. He worked early, late, Saturdays, holidays. He worked on Christmas Eve, and I'm sure that if he'd been able to talk my grandfather into putting on his hat and cranking his pickup on Christmas morning, James would have worked that day, too. I remember telling him once that he was the workingest man I'd ever met. He laughed. "I like to work," he said. Simple as that.

I can't say I knew James well. I never met his children or visited him at his home. But during my adolescent summers on the farm, when I was just figuring out how to be an adult, James was a man I admired. Craving his respect showed me the value of earning it from others, and working next to him taught me to take satisfaction in work.

After my grandparents retired and James moved on to another farm, I'd see him now and then during visits home. He'd wave from a tractor on the highway or stop to chat at the edge of a field. The last time I saw him was a month before he died, at Linda Melvin's

store in Harrells. He was walking out as my grandfather and I walked in. I started to call his name, but before I could, he was out the door and climbing into his pickup, heading back to work.

—Lydialyle Gibson
3/15/07