

Tobacco

John Womack, Jr.

Making tobacco into cigarettes in Veracruz in the 1900's hardly mattered outside the towns where it happened. The great companies of Mexico City, above all El Buen Tono, dominated even these markets, where the local firms had to cut every corner to survive. The production of cigarettes in Orizaba, Jalapa, and elsewhere in the state made a more than negligible difference only to the few men in the business, the few (altogether some 180) workers whom they employed, and the few city governments license fees.

Turning tobacco into cigars, however, made an important difference throughout the region. It relieved hundreds of growers not only in Veracruz but also in neighboring Oaxaca and Tabasco. It delivered vital income to the state's many *chinchaleros* and several big owners of cigar factories. And, besides the pleasure and prestige brought to smokers around the Republic, the products also allowed payments of substantial revenue to the federal, state, and several city governments.

Work at the cigarette factories, small as they were, resembled work at most other kinds of factories in obvious respects. It took place inside the same places six days a week. It went every day from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., except for the short afternoon on Saturday. And it happened around and with machinery. Imported from France and the United States, powered by electricity or steam engines, cutting machines shredded the leaves, casing machines softened and flavored the makings, and, typically, Bonsacks fed makings into an endlessly running thin channel of paper, enveloped the makings into a roll, and sliced the continuously elongating rod into cigarettes, from 250 to 400 a minute.

Cutting and casing machines took two workers to operate, a man and a boy helping. At the making machines there were usually three workers, often three women, one to feed the makings into the hopper and see that nothing but tobacco went into it, another to watch the complicated motion and periodically hone the slicing blade, the third to catch the cigarettes on a tray, check them, discard the grossly defective, and hand a full tray to the packer, ordinarily a woman. By hand this worker would fill packs and close them, others would glue the federal revenue stamp on them, and still others would box them for shipment. But the definitive operations were mechanical. There too, consequently, were the other kinds of workers generally necessary for industrial production: not only a warehouseman or two, a doorman and nightwatchman for security, a handyman and some peons for the buildings and grounds, a stableman and his boys, but also maybe a fireman for power and certainly a mechanic, for the motor or engine and the machines.

Most diverse were the operations at La Violeta, in Orizaba. There, besides the machines and workers making cigarettes, were a box factory with its mechanical saws, five or six carpenters and their helper, a labeler, and a trimmer, making cedar boxes and labeling them for the cigars produced elsewhere in the factory, and a printing plant with two presses, a printer, and his devil, making labels, catalogues, price lists, and advertisements. And besides the other essential extras there were two mechanics.

But work at a cigar factory was industrially very odd. "Cuban hand work," it happened in a big building in [?] departments, for more or less the regular daily hours and working week, but without machinery. The pervasive smell in every department was the rich aroma of the leaf. This was manufacturing in the old, literal sense: instead of devices externally powered and internally guided for operation, the workers had only simple

furniture and a few tools to use. Even so, they handled the raw material at successive phases in a continuous process, and cooperated for production.

The biggest cigar factory represented not an elaboration but only a magnification of the others. La Prueba had nine departments. The southwestern quarter of the stately building was the coolest, darkest, and driest. There was the first department, storage, where as many as 5,000 bales of tobacco from three years to six months old, more or less through the second fermentation, lay in stacks four or five high. Properly made, a bale consisted of “natural cloth” of royal palm bark bound around 80 tied bundles each of four tied sheaves each of 40 leaves of filler, 25-35 [?] wrapper, 9,600-12,800 leaves, every leaf of filler or wrapper unique, the largest a foot long, the smallest four inches.

Depending on the number and size of its leaves, a bale weighed anything from 100 to 250 pounds. And it bore a bag that told its origin, date of arrival, type, condition, and class (ordinarily one if filler, three if wrapped). Under a foreman, who kept the records, dictated movements, and did some of the work, a couple of warehousemen received deliveries and daily shifted the position of certain bales, moved the likeliest for work to the sky-lit patio for partial opening and examination, restored the not yet passable, with leaves still greenish, carefully opened the ones ready and needed for production, the leaves all cinnamon brown, 10-12 bales a day, and put the duly noted 800-960 bundles in boxes on the other side of the patio.

This area was for the second department, *mojado*, moistening. Under another working foreman and amid tubs, casks, and barrels, four or five men in heavy white aprons handled the bundles like brown, crumpled, holy parchments. Carefully with his left hand a man would take from a receiving box a bundle by its stems, hold it tips out

and down, delicately with his right hand separate the tips folded and stuck together, slowly ease his right hand up between leaves to the stems, from inside pull loose the palm string around them, part the four sheaves so as not to break a leaf, and then, taking sheaf by sheaf in his left hand, separate with his right its 25-40 leaves. The four sheaves untangled, he would wet them in a tub of daily fresh dip (water and saltpeter, wine, or vinegar) for as much moisture as they seemed to want, then grip them by the stems, two sheaves in each hand (a forefinger between them), raise them over his head, and quickly lower them, several times, to shake off the water. Often shaking them was not enough; especially in the dry season, just before a Norther, he would have to lay them aside for a while, on a nearby rack, to air. Sooner or later during the day he would carry the by then softened and pliable tobacco to a cask, if it was filler, or to its class's barrel, if it was wrapper, remove the damp cloth cover, remove the dry cloth underneath, carefully lay the sheaves inside, recover them, and go back for another bundle. Often the foreman from the fifth department would visit to check on the wrapper. Continually boys would come with boxes, take sheaves from the casks or barrels filled with day before, and carry them upstairs.

The northwestern room on the second floor was for the third department, *despalillado*, stripping. Bright sunlight usually streamed through the northern windows. A foreman walked about giving orders, taking notes and reports. Often the foreman from the sixth department joined him and watched. And beside 40-odd open barrels 40-odd women worked sitting upright on crude stools. From the barrel on each woman's left fell a heavy, broad, white cloth, one end draped over that side of the barrel's edge, the other down over her lap and knees. On her right stood a little open case with two rough

shelves, about two feet long, nine inches deep. The boys who brought the brown sheaves from moistening would lay them as directed, class by class, in the correct barrels. The foreman, who himself would daily do some stripping to feel the condition of the material, would have chalked on a woman's case the class in her barrel. And she would be stripping as carefully but also as fast as she could. To start, reaching with her left hand into the barrel, she would take a sheaf out, tenderly press it between her hands to smooth it, and lay it face up across her left thigh, stems in, tips out. She loosened the waste leaf that had tied the stems. Taking the top leaf in both hands, she split it with her fingers from where the stem grew into the midrib out to the tip, if possible so that both the left and right halves of the leaf parted intact, the stem and midrib on the right half. Then she held the tip of the right half between her right thumb and forefinger and pulled the midrib and stem away from the tip down with her left thumb and fingers. If she was stripping filler, she might stop the split midway or three-quarters up a small leaf, cut the midrib with her fingernails, and pull away only the length along the split, to leave the leaf's halves together across its top. The halves or the still partly together leaf she laid to her left on the cloth over the barrel's edge, tips inside, bottoms hanging out and even. Accidentally or deliberately, to hurry, she might tear a half or whole leaf, maybe into shreds. Its piece she laid to her right in little straight piles on the lower shelf. Anyway she took the midrib, which she had dropped in her lap, picked off useful fragments of leaf, put them in the little piles too, and flicked the stem to the floor. If she had wrapper in her barrel, she stripped all the leaves all the way. The cleanly stripped halves, two strips, their faces silky, she gently stretched from tip to bottom and with both hands laid the left and then the right strip face up in their respective piles over the barrel's edge,

bottoms out and even. Any strip that she tore she had to put aside on the filler shelf. When she finished the last leaf, she took each pile of 25 strips off the barrel, tied a stripped stem around its middle, laid the batch back on the barrel, and reached inside for another sheaf. Stripping filler or wrapper, averaging a leaf every 10 seconds, she ordinarily went through around ??? sheaves a day.

Boys from the fourth department, *secado*, drying, continually came to the women, laid filler from barrels and shelves in boxes, and carried it next door south into another cool, dark room. There were several closed bins and many covered barrels, where tobacco was aging in a final fermentation. When a boy brought a box of filler, a man would take it, open a bin, shelve the box, check the dryness of the other boxes, maybe open or close the window in back, and reclose the bin. It would have been best if he had left the tobacco to age in its own time, like wood for a violin. But driven by daily deliveries, orders, and visits from the foreman of the sixth department, he followed a faster schedule. Depending on the tobacco and the weather, he would let a box age from two days to two weeks. As soon as he considered the material dry enough not to rot but still moist enough for *empalme*, blending, he or his helper would remove it from the bin, uncover a barrel, handful by handful lay the strips and pieces inside, like “sardines in a keg,” and recover the barrel. These blends were the *depositos*, the stock.

Next door east of stripping along the northern side was a usually bright, sunny room for the fifth department, *rezagado*, sorting. Carefully from stripping boys brought marked boxes of wrapper to the foreman, who kept the various batches classed in detail, assigned them as they came to the sorters readiest for them, and recorded the entering statements of quality, the judgments of the sorters, and the destination of the various

sorts. And beside 10 barrels the 10 men who did the sorting sat upright on stools. Like the strippers, they each had a heavy, white cloth draped from the barrel edge on the left over their lap and knees; but each had on his right a bucket of daily clean water and a little sponge. From the barrel a sorter would carefully take a batch of wrapper, lay it face up over his left thigh, and undo the stem around it. Strip after strip he would sprinkle with water if it seemed dry, gently take it in both hands, sniff it, stretch it “like kid leather,” study its silky face an instant or two, and lay it face up in one or another pile on the barrel’s edge, having told by smell, touch, and sight which strips should be sent back as filler to the drying room, which would serve for wrapper, and which really were the very best in quality, size, color, and texture. When he had a pile of 25 strips, he tied it into a *pesada*, a “weight,” and laid it back on the barrel, to be taken away to the next department. Often the foreman interrupted his concentration, wondering angrily where all the earlier predicted good wrapper had gone, quizzing him about the discrepancies between prior high classifications and his pessimistic conclusions, relaying from the next department complaints about his overly optimistic judgments. Often the foreman from the next department would come and complain in person, loudly. The more meticulous sorters were, the less distraction they could tolerate. To keep the wrapper moving, they each had to judge on the average a strip every six seconds, 250 batches a day. And their day ended in a peculiar emptiness. The foreman would stop the sorting early, having the “weights” and the piles on the barrels locked up in cans to keep them moist till tomorrow, and, as further hindrance to collusion between handlers of filler and handlers of wrappers, make the men wait until all the other workers had left the building.

The next department was the biggest. Termed in the trade *labrado*, crafting, or *torcido*, twisting, called in the factory *las galeras*, the galleys, it was where filler and wrapper were combined into cigars. The galleys were its space, two large halls, “splendidly ventilated,” with northern exposure and “a profusion of sunlight.” Their furniture revealed how the craft could count as an industry, simply but solely but multiplication of the points of production. Across the width of each hall ran 20 large wooden tables, nicknamed *vapores*, steamboats, each about 15 feet long and three feet wide. Divided down the middle by a T-framed partition a foot wide and a foot high, each half cross-sectioned by panels into five equal subdivisions called *mesas*, tables, one of the large tables served for ten small desk-like tables, each about a yard wide and 18 inches deep, covered at the back, closed on either side, and numbered in front. On every partition stood a couple jugs of fresh water and 10 little pots, for gum tragacanth. Most of the seats were not stools but low-backed chairs. From one desk-table to the next equipment was the same. Flat on the table lay a thick, hardwood cutting and rolling board, about nine by 12 inches. On the board was a *chaveta*, a curved steel knife about six inches along the blade, blunt on top, without a handle. Behind the board was a *cepo*, a bracket-shaped wooden ruler about eight inches long, with a hole in the middle of the long part. In folds on the table’s upper right lay a heavy, white cloth, dry, about 18 inches square. Likewise on the lower left lay a similar cloth, damp, about 12 inches square. From the front of the table hung a small burlap sack. On a full working day, under the searching eyes of their foreman, who assumed that “secret warnings were no good,” 400 *pureros*, cigarmakers, all men, would be at the tables, each using the identical tools and doing the same work as the others, making one cigar after another. The sounds

were all human, the foreman's shouts, the makers' conversations, complaints, jokes, singing, laughing—except for the thin, dry sound of steel cutting leaf on the board.

La Prueba kept numerous *vitolas*, different models for makers to copy in shaping cigars. There were the huge Victoria, Limantour, and McKinley, the big Corona and Cervantes, the middle-sized Coronita, Fulton, and Suspiros de Guillermina, the barely smaller Glorias de Victor Hugo, Britanico, and Palmita, several short styles, including the Concha, the old reliable export to England, and 20 or more others. On instructions from his superior, the foreman would daily order some makers to make one model, others to make another, and so on, and if necessary show a man a model or remind him of the cigar's proper length, thickness, and contour.

But whichever model the foreman told him to make, a maker went through the same sequence of movements and manipulations. Starting the day at his usual table, he checked any cigars he had left under the cover yesterday evening, cleaned the board, maybe scraped it, dropped scraps in the burlap sack, sprinkled water on the small cloth, sharpened the knife, and waited. At the foreman's signal for his steamer, he took both cloths from the table and went with his neighbors to the drying room, got from the stock enough strips and pieces of filler in the dry cloth for 25 cigars, went to the sorting room, got a *pesada* of wrapper in the damp cloth, returned to his seat, laid filler right and wrapper left, and folded their cloths over them. All in place, he took the first strip of wrapper in his left hand, laid it softly face up on the board, its inner edge toward the back, and with palms and fingertips opened it and stretched it, segment by segment, looking and feeling for tiny holes or tears or other defects. Then, remembering the model as intensely as he could, he took the knife and quickly but delicately drew it to cut away

vein endings on the upper and middle outer edge, a margin along the inner edge, and a bit of the tip, to round it. He also then envisaged and fixed in his mind the crucial cut he would later make around the bottom of the strip. Leaving the wrapper on the board and laying the knife aside, he reached his right hand into the filler, felt for a whole strip, at least a sizable oblong piece, one without rough veins, pulled it out, opened it with both hands, and laid it open face down in his left hand, the inner edge on his fingertips. This piece would be the backing. Next, in “one of the most important and scrupulous” acts of the craft, the man reached his right hand again into the filler, by feel alone took just as much as he recalled the model needing, and put the pieces on the backing cupped in his left hand. He sensed how much he had, and carefully laid the little bunch in its backing on the board. He might remove or add a fragment or two. He picked obvious remnants of midrib and vein butts out of the bunch, opened, closed, and adjusted the pieces so that they fitted lengthwise beside each other, all tips at the far end, the bottoms at the front, cut off pieces too long, and distributed the excess back along the length. Sure that he had the amount and proportions due, that the pieces lay straight, none crossing over another, and that no sliver of wrapper had slipped among them, he lifted the bunch on its backing, held the outer edge of the backing between his left thumb and fingers, and with his right thumb and fingers closed the inner edge over the contents and under the outer edge to make a roll, not too tight or too loose, round, and without lumps or ridges. If the backing would not close or looked defective otherwise, he laid the roll on the board, reopened it, stretched the backing, rearranged the contents, and tried again. Closed and in proper form, the roll became in the maker’s jargon *el zorullo*, the turd. It was the substance of the cigar, 90-95% of its weight; and if it did not have the requisite firmness, give,

thickness, and contour, the cigar would be wrong. With the roll in his left hand, the maker plucked any shreds protruding from its near end, which would be the cigar's head. Then, refocusing on the wrapper, he gently lifted it and turned it over on the board, face down, the outer edge toward the back. If it was a left strip from the leaf, he wrapped the roll toward the right and watched with special care that its backing did not unroll. If the wrapper was a right strip, he wrapped the roll the other way, but without fears for its backing. He took the wrapper's far end between his right thumb and forefinger, put the roll on the board so that its far end lay diagonally across the wrapper's, brought the underlying wrapper end over the roll's end for a good *emboquillado*, or tuck, and then, while with his left fingertips he kept stretching the wrapper, membrane and veins, out to the left, with his right fingers he rolled the roll leftward spirally into the wrapper. When he had about four-fifths of the roll smoothly wrapped, without a wrinkle, he stopped, rolled it slightly back and forth, unrolled it a turn, rerolled it up to where it had been, and did another slight roll back and forth. To finish, he kept the roll and remaining wrapper tightly apart with his left fingers, resummoned the memory of the model, took the knife again in his right hand, cut the lower outer edge of the wrapper away to leave just enough flag, put the knife aside, picked the roll up in his right hand, took a smear of gum on his left fingertips, dabbed it on the flag, and with his two forefingertips smoothly wrapped it around the head, curled the tail over the point, and sealed it. If the flag tore, he cursed, quietly, looked into the pieces cut away or into the damp pile for a little patch of matching color and texture, cut it out, and gummed it over the tear. Lightly pressing the finished cigar with the flat of the knife on the board, he rolled it back and forth two or three times. If it seemed too long, he reached in embarrassment for the measure, checked

the length, and cut off any extra tuck. Then he laid the cigar in back under the cover, and started another. A maker with excellent filler and wrapper and Cuban skill could make a middle-sized cigar every three minutes. But the customary speed was one every four or five minutes.

When he had no more filler or wrapper on the table, a maker put scraps into the sack and went for another supply. And when, adding yesterday's leftovers and the morning's production, he had 50 cigars under the cover, he took them out and bound them into a *media rueda*, half a wheel. Across a palm string from a pad of wrapper he laid 14 cigars side by side on them 13; on them 12; on top 11, all the tucks toward him, then pulled the string up, and tied it. This bundle he tagged with his number and stood heads up on the cover in back. It had better stand straight and even. The foreman noted the numbers on the bundles as boys carried them away.

At the end of the day the maker usually had some material and few than 50 cigars on the table. Boys collected the filler and wrapper for return to the fourth and fifth departments. Another boy emptied gum pots into a bucket, from which he would refill them in the morning. And the maker tied up the cigars he had finished, *picos*, not enough for half a wheel, and put them back under the cover, whence he would take them in the morning as his start toward tomorrow's first bundle.

The seventh department was *escogida*, literally selection, in effect picking and packing. It occupied the building's northeastern corner, its sunniest room. And its foreman, a master cigar maker himself, bore the title of inspector. Near the door from the galleys lay several long, deep cedar chests. There boys continually brought the bundles of cigars, and a couple of men took them and stowed them as the foreman directed in one

or another of the chests to mellow. Around the two windowed sides of the room stood 16 tables, eight of them picking tables, three feet wide and five feet long, with a half moon cut out in front, each adjacent to a packing table three feet wide and eight feet long.

Pickers who yesterday had left nothing in the overnight chest began their day by going to the chests where the foreman said the cigars had sufficiently mellowed (from three to seven days), taking armfuls of the model ordered, returning to their tables, carefully laying the bundles on their side, and opening them. The first selection was easy. The picker took a handful of cigars, maybe 20 at a time, and according to their luster sorted them one by one into two piles, *seco* (dry) to his left and *machado* (glossy) to his right. He put the few obvious botches in a separate box, and called the inspector to report a particular maker's serious faults. After he had about a thousand cigars divided between dry and glossy, he refocused, leaned for the best light, and according to their shade of brown subdivided the cigars in each pile into three rows, from light to dark: *colorado claro* to the left, *colorado maduro* to the right, *colorado* (the rest) in the middle. Then, straining his eyes harder, he subdivided the dry and glossy *maduro* rows each into two more, *maduro claro* and *maduro oscuro*. Usually in about an hour and a half he would have the thousand cigars arrayed before him in four more or less extended rows on either side. Meanwhile next to him the packer had begun his day by taking from the overnight chest bundles of yesterday's late pickings, carefully laying them across the long table, and fetching from a nearby cabinet a stack of cigar boxes of the proper size and ordered capacity. One by one at the left end of the table he had opened the bundles, laid 50 cigars in a row if he had boxes for 50, put the 12 finest cigars off to his right, laid inside a box a bottom row of 13, on it a row of 12, on it another row of 13, all tucks front, put a thin

board over the fourth layer, fixed the box in a small screw-press, and put it off to the right. Usually about the time the picker finished his first eight rows of cigars, the packer would have 20 rows of the finest dozens and 20 boxes in press on the right side of the long table. While the picker went for more bundles, the packer took from the longest rows on the picking table as many lots of 50 cigars as there were, and, as the picker returned to his divisions and subdivisions, the packer proceeded as he had before on the packing table. When he had separated the finest dozens and boxed and pressed the others of the new lots, he undid the presses on the earliest pressed boxes, removed the boards over the fourth layers, laid in each box a face layer of 12 of the finest, and closed and repressed the boxes. These a boy periodically carried away and shelved in a case along the wall. So the pickers and packers around the room continued through the day, each pair averaging about 12 boxes of 50 cigars an hour. As full boxes in press accumulated along the wall, the inspector had a man open the earliest pressed for him to examine. All that passed inspection he had the man stack and truck away. Any that [missing page 19]

...band of buttercups in her long, curly, brown hair, resting her right arm on a table, tilting her dark-browed, broad, fresh, tan face toward her left, a sweet girl stared patiently and faintly cross-eyed into far distance.

But the new attraction hardly altered the work in the decorating room. There were then four tables and stools and three paste pots and piles of wiping rags. The men who brought the full boxes from packing left them in stacks beside the table where a man had piles of flaps. This man took box after box, raised the lid, pasted the picture in place, wiped off the excess paste, closed the lid, and put the box on the table alongside. A man

there set box after box in a simple frame, nailed the lid down tight, and slid the box along the next table. Its man had piles of labels, which he pasted over the lid and right side and wiped clean. He slid the boxes along the fourth table, where a man with piles of revenue stamps pasted them over the lid and front, wiped them, and stacked the boxes for boys to carry away.

Downstairs on the east side was the last department, *empaques*, shipping. In a day the two or three men there would receive hundreds of boxes from decoration, crate them as a clerk directed, and load invoiced and addressed crates on the wagons outside.

Like factories in other industries, La Prueba had 12-15 masons, carpenters, and handymen to maintain the building and its furniture, three or four janitors, and a couple of nightwatchmen. But it had no stable. And, without machinery, it had no engine room, repair shop, machinists, or mechanics.