

Answers to Questions

“WHAT IS TOBACCO BAG STRINGING?”



Empty tobacco bag with string. Photograph from North Carolina Collection gallery, UNC Libraries.

1. What is tobacco bag stringing?

One way tobacco was sold was in small bags of loose tobacco. The tobacco companies hired people to thread strings into the tops of these bags so that they could be pulled shut. Sometimes the tobacco bag stringers also attached a tag that indicated the name of the company.

2. Why was it necessary to hire workers to sew drawstrings into the tobacco bags?

. The bags were made by machine, but only one company had a machine that could put the strings into the bags. The other companies had to hire people to string the thread into the tops of the bags manually

3. What was the approximate amount of money a tobacco bag stringer would earn per bag?

An average was fifty cents for threading one thousand bags.

4. Very little income was earned from the stringers. Why was this small amount of money so important to the families of the stringers? Why particularly in 1939?

Farm families had little income, particularly disposable income, during the Depression. This question asks students to make the connection that 1939 was still during the Depression.

5. Why do you think that the Golden Belt Manufacturing Company did not share its method of mechanically inserting the strings with the other two companies?

Students may discuss the idea of monopoly and how the company could benefit by having this technology. This could lead to a discussion about the importance of technology in industry.

6. What do you believe “running short time” means? Why would that affect the tobacco bag stringing jobs?

Answers may vary. Running short time meant that the mills were not having workers work for full shifts or were operating for less hours. The tobacco stringing jobs would have been more important to the families when less money could be made in the mills.

7. How could the position of bag agent become a powerful one? Why is this significant?

A bag agent would determine who was given the bags to string. He or she could help the poorest people in the district or could help friends or relatives. It is significant because of the power the position could have in a district. Tobacco bag stringers would have been dependent on this person for their jobs. If the agent were unethical, prejudiced, or dishonest this would affect the lives of many people.

8. In what possible situations would you have wanted to be a tobacco bag stringer?

Answers will vary.

“TOBACCO BAG STRINGING AND THE MINIMUM WAGE”



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt speaking in Denver, Colorado, circa 1936. Photograph from American Memory, Library of Congress.

9. What was the minimum wage required by the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) passed by Congress and signed into law by President Roosevelt in 1938? What was the average hourly wage estimated to have been made by tobacco bag stringers?

Twenty-five cents an hour. Most tobacco bag stringers earned five to thirteen cents an hour.

10. Why was the Virginia–Carolina Service Corporation hoping to get an amendment to the FLSA?

The Virginia-Carolina Service Corporation was attempting to exempt tobacco bag stringers from the hourly requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act so that the stringers could still be employed by the tobacco companies.

11. What methods did the corporation use to argue for the amendment?

The corporation paid for a report whose authors interviewed stringers, took photographs of the workers, and requested information from tobacco bag agents.

12. Do you think these methods would be effective? Why or why not?

Answers will vary. Most students may indicate that the stories of poverty and great need would have been an effective emotional tool.

13. Do you think most of the tobacco bag stringers were for or against the minimum wage required by the FLSA? Why or why not?

Answers will vary. Most students will probably argue that the stringers would have been against the minimum wage law as it would jeopardize their employment as stringers.

14. “Report on Tobacco Bag Stringing Operations in North Carolina and Virginia” was produced for what purpose? Why is it necessary to remember that when you begin to read and analyze these documents and visuals? How does that influence your evaluation of these primary sources materials?

The report was produced to influence lawmakers to approve an amendment that would exempt tobacco bag stringers from the minimum wage requirements set forth in the FLSA. Students must remember that the writers and reports reflect that agenda – that there is bias in the report. Anytime that students evaluate primary source material they need to ask why the work was produced in order to read and evaluate the material critically.