

Hemp: A Civil War Era Cash Crop

by Emily Pike

Beginning in the 1800s and continuing throughout the Civil War, hemp was an extremely popular cash crop in Clay County. The farmers that produced hemp did not require land that they could plow deeply, but they needed to be rich and fertile soil, and weather that included extreme heat, dry temperatures, along with a good draining system. Hemp was one of the fastest growing plants and rapidly dominated the other plants, namely weeds.

After planting, hemp plants would mature in about three months. They ranged from five to nine feet tall, and had a thickness of approximately a man's finger. There were branches only at the top foot of the stalk. At one point in time, the plants were individually pulled up by hand, stalk by stalk. Cultivating hemp required extremely hard labor, especially during the hot weather of August. Knowing that an invention needed to be created in order to harvest the crops faster and more efficiently, the hemp hook was invented during the Civil War era. The hook was modeled after the letter L, with the horizontal section composed a blade that was about fourteen inches long and the vertical part containing a wooden handle that fit onto the iron shaft.

The slaves who were forced to grow this crop initially protested the implementation of this new device, but soon realized that it was much better than pulling the plants by their own bare hands. The cutter would always pull the hemp facing the sun. He would cut towards the east in morning and the west in the afternoon. This technique was devised by the workers, so that they could avoid as much sunlight as possible and be protected by the shade of the stalk. Even with this beneficial technique, this was one of the most physically exhausting and sun exposed during this particular time.

The worker would cut the plants with his right hand and held them in his left arm until he reached his limit and could simply no more for he had achieved his maximum capacity. He would then evenly spread the plants out upon the ground where they would ripen as they lay in the sun. Plants were usually left outside until October, soaking up the sunlight, and getting enough rain to make the fibers break loose from the stalk. The hemp was then shocked, just as one shocks corn, generally until December. Then, the worker would break it using a "hemp rake," which was five boards that fit together, so that the wooden stalks would be broken into short pieces. These "hurds" were then shaken clear of the fiber. It was said that a "good" man could break about 200 pounds in one day. The long and silky fibers were then tied up into "hands" and placed into a dry area until they were ready for shipment. This rope would travel around the country by means of the Missouri River. Having this body of water was crucial to the business, for it provided timely transportation of the hemp.

One specific hemp factory in Clay County was founded in 1836 by Alvan Lightburne. While previously living in Kentucky, Lightburne entered the business of producing rope, twine, and bagging. When he returned to Liberty, he established himself by producing rope and operating the factory for 22 years.

By 1860, Missouri had produced approximately 20,000 tons of rope made from hemp., by 1870 production began to decrease to the point where only 2,816 tons were being produced. As the time began to pass, the amount of rope began to decrease. In 1879, only 209 tons were produced, in the year 1890, 30 tons and after that, the production deceased entirely.

While hemp was a new product, the price could vary from about \$3.33 to \$14 for every one hundred pounds, to later \$190-\$200 for a ton.

As these figures demonstrate, when hemp began to vanish, it disappeared rather quickly. Its fall occurred suddenly due to the rise of so many other products that possessed similar features. Wire and iron ties could be used for bailing, and because they were produced through cheap labor, they became the replacement for most of the rope supply. The crop also disappeared because although it was a productive crop, it required too much labor for its amount of profit. Interestingly enough hemp was not used for marijuana at this time. Many people were satisfied with their tobacco products and did not comprehend the unique multitude of uses of this cash crop.

Just as swiftly as hemp production boomed, it just as quickly dissipated. Although it was an extremely successful crop, especially within Clay County, it did not withstand the test of time. It did, however, prove to be a profitable product during its short period of production. Today, it can be found used in necklaces and bracelets, fabric, clothing, shoes, body care products, and medicinal purposes. It became a staple of the Hippie movement and today many people use it, though illegal, for recreational purposes to get a drug-induced "high." Although hemp is a popular product today, its popularity as a cash crop can neither rival nor compare to its fame when it was produced into rope in 19th century Clay County.

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