

## **OUR SOIL OUR LEGACY**

By Grace Cogan

Agriculture has played a large role in the legacy of Platte County. Since the mid-1820s, farmers have come to Platte County from states such as Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio for the many opportunities the lush soil provided. Cattle farmers found the grass was beneficial for their herds to graze on and crop growers found that the soil was particularly suitable for tobacco. Nowadays, Platte County farmers still keep the family heritage alive for cattle still graze and crops are still raised and harvested.

One of the first known crops grown for profit was Chinese Hemp used for rope making, fabric and a product called oakum, used to make ship hulls water tight. Kentuckians arrived in Platte County in 1843 and it is said this is when the first hemp crop was planted and harvested. It was then exported down the Missouri River.

Growing hemp was hard work and in the dawn of the Civil War, slaves did most of the labor involving this crop. The first large hemp crop exported yielded 100 tons worth sixty dollars per ton. T.F. Warner, Cody Perrys and A. Baker were some of the names associated with Chinese Hemp growing in Platte County. In 1867 5,000 tons were exported all over the country. It is said Platte County ranked second in hemp production in the United States. Some people suggested it produced the most in the world and was ranked first in quality. In 1875, ten years after the end of slavery Chinese Hemp production nearly ceased due to the lack of labor. Former slaves, now free citizens, refused to do the work.

Sometime after the Civil War, as more and more settlers arrived from the states of Kentucky, Ohio and Virginia they found all areas of the county to be very fertile and productive for all types of farming from wheat to livestock. They also found the soil was perfect for growing a more specific kind of tobacco, Burley Tobacco. The first large crop, grown for export, proved to be a success. After farmers harvested the tobacco, it was loaded onto rafts and sent down the river to central towns in Missouri where it was combined with other tobacco crops from Missouri and then sent on to markets in Kentucky. As the settlers moved west tobacco was grown in areas all along the "Mighty" Missouri River. In 1894, 14,000 pounds of tobacco was shipped to Kentucky. A few areas found success with tobacco such as Glasgow, Missouri. However, no other county in the state was able to grow tobacco as well as Platte County. This was the beginning of commercial tobacco in Missouri.

In 1909, it is said Cox Lumber sold enough lumber to build thirty tobacco barns. Sometime in 1911, JB Doran constructed the very first loose leaf tobacco warehouse. In 1916, Doran also acquired two new warehouses that allowed farmers the only market west of the Mississippi, two in Weston, and two in Dearborn.

Weston once had tobacco fairs with food and beverages provided by the local merchants. The shows also had games, exhibits, and even queen contests. Farmers enjoyed seeing how successful the year's crop was and their children enjoyed a fun filled day. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1929, the very first tobacco show was held. During the war, spirits were too heavy to hold the events. The very last tobacco show was held in 1957. At one time sixty two percent of Missouri's Burley crop came from Platte County. Almost a hundred years later, only a very few farmers of Platte County still plant

tobacco but, it is still remembered and remains as the “Cash Crop”.

Another large crop in Platte County, was the apple. In its early day, the main apple was Ben Davis. It was known for the significant time span it could be stored.. The earliest known apple orchards of the county were those of C Thorp and WR Keller; both men were well known in the area. Early newspaper articles might lead one to believe that both men soon became only buyers and whole sale brokers of the fruit. It is said that Thorp was the biggest buyer of apples with houses in Weston, Tracy, and even DeKalb. Keller purchased his own apples in order to ship them all over the country and bought approximately 12,000 barrels in 1888.

It was during this same time period, that William Rees, a former Sergeant in the Civil War, and his cousin John Meek Downy had settled in northern Platte County and began the Rees/Downy Orchard about nine miles north of Weston in Roseville, Missouri – today, known as Rushville. Rees was known as the “Apple King” to almost everyone who knew and did business with him, for it was said that he was a kind and honest man who was well respected. The first Rees/Downy Orchard was said to have been a total of 160 acres.

In 1911, the Harpst and Rodenburg Orchard was shipping four to five railroad cars a day, apples were high in demand. There were many family orchards in Platte County but Thorp/Keller Rees/Downy, Brill, Harpst/Rodenburg, Hardesty, and Shouse were some of the largest and were commercial orchards. In 1929, it was reported that Jonathan apples of the area were appearing on the table of the King of England.

In 1925, Edwin Vaughn planted an apple orchard. He began by planting apple trees in a small orchard and years later, L.R. Vaughn and his wife Sue continued his legacy caring for the orchard tending to their own country store just outside of Weston, Missouri. After years in the orchard business, the Vaughn family decided to close the orchard in 2010.

Around the same time Edwin Vaughn started his family orchard, the Hall brothers began their very own orchard. Along with four other families, they purchased a rail car full of young apple trees from Wathena, Kansas, however, after purchasing the saplings a natural disaster occurred that wiped out the young trees of the other four orchards, only the Hall orchard survived. Halls harvested their last apples in the 1990's.

Today, a majority of Platte County citizens do not look upon agriculture as their main source of income, however, the modern farmers of the area keep the legacy of agriculture alive throughout Platte County. During the 1800s, an ordinary man may have come to Platte County, kneaded down and brushed the soil with his hand. He may have stood up and smiled. This was his new home and a way to provide for his family. He may have planted tobacco, apples, hemp, or raised cattle. Today's farmers are still a representation of those early settlers.

It is my belief that Platte County's agriculture has made us who we are today. From those early families to our present farmers, the farming spirit is continuing and will continue.

L.R. Vaughn and his sons, have once again planted a quaint orchard in a part of the Vaughn Apple Orchard. Earlier this year, they harvested their first crops of apples and peaches.

I believe that agriculture defines our history very well. Families have depended on the crops for the past two and a half centuries and still continue to today. This is our soil, our home and our legacy.

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