

VENTURE BOUND

Virginia farm the site of major agricultural innovation



Wayne Anderson /Tribune

The blacksmith shop at the McCormick Farm is where Cyrus McCormick and his brothers developed the first reaper, a tool that changed the face of agriculture.

By **WAYNE ANDERSON** and **CARLA ANDERSON**

Sunday, November 15, 2015 at 12:00 am

When Carla and I were in Lexington, Va., earlier this year, I made a special trip to visit the McCormick Farm, which was home to Cyrus McCormick. In 1851, McCormick patented a much-improved mechanical reaper.

What, you ask, is a reaper? It's a piece of farm equipment that looks like a large lawn mower. It first was pulled by horses and then by tractors.

Still, the simple reaper drastically changed agriculture and practically put the making of scythes out of business, relegating them to the same status of the buggy whip after the horseless carriage was invented.

Before McCormick patented a reaper in 1834, harvesting was a labor-intensive business done mostly with a scythe and the whole family working together, often with neighbors helping to get the crop in on time.

With a reaper, whole swaths of grain could be cut at one time. With later developments, the swaths could be bound into bundles and gathered into shocks to dry. The dried shocks then were pitched on a wagon and brought to another great invention, the threshing machine, for the wheat to be separated from the straw.

During the late 1940s, I ran a reaper using a tractor. I bundled the grain, shocked the grain, pitched bundles — and hated it. It was the main reason I went to college, where I was sure I would learn something that would prevent me from having to work for a living.

McCormick's father had been mechanically inclined and had experimented with designs to mechanize agriculture. I suspect his son had a similar reason for inventing the reaper as a way to cut down on labor. His innovations did more than that — they revolutionized farming and markedly increased the size of crops that could be planted and harvested.

The main part of the museum at the farm consists of two old buildings: one was the family grist mill, which was powered by a local stream, and the other was a blacksmith shop. On the first floor is the shop where McCormick and his brothers made the first reaper.

The second floor has a model of the first reaper developed, which was pulled by one horse. Over time, the reapers got bigger. Growing up, I had never seen one that didn't need two horses to pull it. Also in the museum is a series of small models of the reaper, which show its development over time. The reaper was so successful, and McCormick so good at convincing farmers they needed it, that he was able to move his operation to Chicago, where it became International Harvester and J.I. Case.

The reaper was one of the new inventions that changed agriculture by enabling fewer people to raise more food, thus freeing up a work force to run industries. This helped change us from a rural nation to an urban one. Later, the invention of the combine also helped in this way.

The museum is on the grounds of the 634-acre farm, historically called Walnut Grove, that now serves as a research station for Virginia Tech. The day we visited, a number of other visitors were having a picnic on the half-dozen tables overlooking a pond with geese and ducks on it — an idyllic setting for a major advance in the mechanization of agriculture.

Reach Wayne and Carla Anderson at andersonwp@missouri.edu.

© 2016 Columbia Daily Tribune. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

SUBSCRIBE to the Tribune today and save more than 50%. You can cancel at any time.

Comments (0)

by Taboola

Sponsored Links

You May Like