

Hemp — not just for hippies?

Marijuana plant products may make the move into mainstream

By MANDY CATER
THE BATTALION

Imagine a world where trees are free to live in peace; a world where fossil fuels are not spewed into the atmosphere by gasoline-guzzling cars. This is the world of hemp.

When one says the word "hemp," they often catch someone's attention. The first response might be a raised eyebrow, or perhaps a toothy grin. Visions of "Dead Heads" in tie-dyed T-shirts dance like sugar plums. That is because hemp has long been on the fringe of the American society, part of the counterculture. But hemp may be mainstream soon.

Hemp is a plant with a bad reputation. Actually, hemp fiber is derived from the plant *Cannabis sativa*, a native of Asia. Historical record indicates that as far back as ancient China, people knew about and grew hemp, making it one of the earliest cultivated plants. Hemp growth spread to Europe even before the Christian era, and eventually it made its way to the United States.

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For years, hemp was regarded as a plant of utility. It was known for being a primary material in ropes and cordage. Clothing made from hemp was common as well. The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution were even printed on hemp paper.

Despite this seemingly respectable past, hemp had a falling from grace. The change of heart may be because of a little burst of greenery that sprouts from the tops of cannabis' tops. This flower is marijuana.

Marijuana became an issue of public concern in the United States in 1937, when newspaper reports linked crime to marijuana use. Governmental regulations sprung up via drug laws, and the future of industrialized hemp in America was up in the air.

Recent years have seen a great deal of hubbub surrounding conservation, recycling and earth-friendly products. Research for viable alternatives to paper and fuel sources has once again put hemp in the spotlight.

Renewed international interest in hemp has spawned the creation of numerous markets and hemp vendors around the globe. Because of corporations like the American Hemp Mercantile, American merchants can offer hemp wares, as well.

The American Hemp Mercantile is a national importer of 100 percent hemp twine, fabrics and paper from Hungary. The corporation supplies the hemp to merchants and crafters across the United States, and even offers an on-line catalog of clothing and accessories on the World Wide Web.

Bryan-College Station is no stranger to the hemp industry, either. Thanks to suppliers like the Mercantile, local businesses can now broaden their offering of earth-centered wares to include hemp.

Hazel Todd of Bryan's Earth Art said the public definitely responds.

"Hemp has been popular for a while," Todd said. "It has that mystique about it."

Earth's First Farms in College Station specializes in hemp merchandise. Although the store offers more mainstream items like hemp clothing and paper goods, employee Bernadette Hinojosa said people might be surprised by how extensive the line of products actually is.

"We carry everything from shoes to food to shampoo," Hinojosa said. But the weirdest wares, Hinojosa said, are hemp coffee and pet products.

Jerry Shears of the Mercantile said hemp twine products are the most requested. They are used for everything from making hammocks to tying bails of hay to making jewelry. Earth Art and Earth's First Farms reported that hemp jewelry is their best-seller.

The major obstacle for the hemp market in the United States is, of course, price. With importing a must, costs are difficult to keep low. Despite the extra pocket change, though, the craze seems to be catching on, especially with hemp fabrics. And the trend is not just for hippies anymore.

"Even Armani comes to us," Shears said.

Although its infamous topper causes problems, the future of hemp is hopeful. Since marijuana only grows on female plants, and agricultural engineering technology continues to advance, promise for industrialized hemp growth in the United States is on the horizon. Trial growth is already taking place in the Midwest.

As environmental concerns continue, hemp's value may ensure it a spot on the American agricultural scene. Those in the know are certain.

"People do not know how valuable hemp is," Shears said. "It requires no chemicals and takes nothing from the soil it leaves behind."

Shears said discoveries have already shown hemp a viable source of fuel for everything from automobiles to stoves. For all those tree huggers out there, though, there is a more important fact to consider.

"Hemp has a 120-day crop cycle, while a tree takes 20 years," Shears said.

So, in other words, hug a tree; grow some hemp.



PHOTOGRAPH: Rony Angkrivan

Bernadette Hinojosa, a sophomore environmental design major, weaves a watch band with hemp.

Trout Fishing reels in audiences of children and adults

By WESLEY BROWN
THE BATTALION

Keith Grimwood and Ezra Idlet have been making music together as Trout Fishing in America for as long as many students have been alive.

Formed in 1976 out of the ashes of another band, St. Elmo's Fire, the Houston duo has been a regular visitor to Bryan-College Station since the beginning, bringing (to bars such as the old Black Hat Saloon) its peculiar blend of folk and humor. Bassist Grimwood said they welcome the chance to return.

"College Station was one of the very first towns to 'get it' with us, to really start to respond, in advance of the rest of the country," he said. "We had people driving in to see us. It was one of the first times that we really started to sell shows in advance of playing them."

Trout Fishing has shows for adults and for

children. In addition to being voted one of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival's "Most Consistently Praised Acts" (along with Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, Joan Osborne and others), the band has received numerous awards for their recent children's album, *Mine!*

Despite its ever-increasing success, however, the band has maintained its original format — two guys with acoustic guitars, and, says Grimwood, its original musical style.

"We have kind of a street performer-type feel," he said. "When street performers play — the really good street performers — there's an attitude there, an energy. We try to capture that rootsy quality with the writing, too. For example, one of the songs off of *Reel Life* (the band's 1996 release) is about an all-night diner we used to go in Shreveport, Louisiana."

Since the beginning of the decade, however, the band has received more and more national attention. Performances in Canada brought

them attention up north, and with the addition of manager Dick Renko, the band began in earnest to establish itself as a national act.

Except for the addition of a drummer for a brief time in the 1980s, the face of Trout Fishing in America has remained (aging aside) the same. The attitude, on the other hand, is vastly changed.

"In the mid-'80s, I was writing a bunch of depressing songs," Grimwood said. "One day, Ezra said, 'Try flipping it around and writing something more upbeat.' I tried it, and it changed our whole style."

Their latest release, *Mine!*, is their first purely children's album. The band was playing for children as early as 1977, when teachers began to ask them to play in classrooms. Although Idlet and Grimwood had never written any children's music, they agreed.

"We ended up playing just the same stuff," Grimwood said. "Our more upbeat music worked with the kids because we didn't sugar-

coat everything like children's music usually does. In fact, we never really wrote anything specifically for children, up until *Mine!*"

Grimwood said this album has allowed the band to separate its children's music from its normal set, although there is some overlap between the two shows.

"Still, of course, our regular set is an extremely energetic show," Grimwood said. "We create a feeling that there are more than two musicians are onstage, so that you can ask yourself, 'Where's that sound coming from?'"

Trout Fishing in America has released seven albums on its own label, Trout Records, and although *Reel Life* is half made up of live tracks, Grimwood said nothing in the studio can compare to the live shows.

"When we play live, we try to set up the aroma of the club, to connect with the crowd and get them really going," he said.



Trout Fishing in America

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