

"Early Reaper Brought Fears to Farm Laborers"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Prior to the mid-twentieth century agriculture was the predominant occupation in Carroll County. New trends in agriculture were, therefore, of great interest to many local residents. The invention of threshing and reaping machines attracted attention when they appeared in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Some recollections about the early reapers appeared in the June 29, 1871 issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper under the headline of The First Reaper In Carroll County:

"It is believed that the first reaping machine introduced into Carroll county, was purchased jointly by Messrs. David Shriver and John Smith, of Wakefield, twenty-seven or eight years ago, about 1844. It was a McCormick machine, with wooden bar, and capable of cutting twenty or thirty acres of wheat per day. When the machine was brought on from Baltimore, there was no one in the neighborhood sufficiently familiar with it to put it together, so Messrs. Smith and Shriver had to pull off their coats and set to work at it themselves. They finally got the machine in working order, and tried it in some grass, but it would not mow. Wheat harvest being at hand, they geared four horses to the machine and put it to cutting wheat. Eleven acres were cut down by dinner time. Some hands in an adjoining field, laid down their cradles and mounted the division fence to get a view of the strange machine, which was destined to supercede the old fashioned cradle, as it had superceded the older reaping hook. Their indignation rose high against this modern innovator, which was to destroy labor and take the bread out of an honest laborer's mouth. They refused to work even in a field alongside of that wherein the machine was employed, and Messrs. Smith and Shriver had to cut their neighbor's crop also, which they did, charging him fifty cents per acre. They cut it down so quick, that the binders could not get it up in time, and a rain came upon it, damaging the crop, the proprietor of the field not being familiar with the number of binders required by one of these machines. The indignation of the laborers in the neighborhood ran so high against this machine, that they threatened to break it in pieces, and it had to be watched at night for fear it would be broken or burned.

The first threshing machine was introduced some ten years earlier. Judge Hanson T. Webb remembers the first one introduced in Union Town District, and drove the team that hauled it, being then about 17 years of age. This was about the year 1834. What immense numbers of these machines have been manufactured since that day, and how impracticable it would be to undertake to conduct the farming operations of the present time without the aid of labor-saving machinery, and laborers are quite as well paid and have as much to do as they had before they were invented."

The reference to the first thresher likely refers to the efforts of several Union Bridge men who developed a reaper before Cyrus McCormick. Obed Hussey improved on a design by Jacob R. Thomas and received a U. S. patent for his invention on December 31, 1833. A State Roads Commission historic marker on Bucher John road outside of Union Bridge records what happened nearby, "The first reaping machine in the world was invented by Jacob R. Thomas and tried near this spot in 1811. Obed Hussey perfected and patented the invention in 1839 [sic] one year prior to the McCormick reaper."

Photo caption: A steel engraving of Obed Hussey's reaper patented in 1833. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.