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Hemp fans look toward Lyster Dewey's past, and the Pentagon, for higher ground

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Hemp needed a hero. Needed one bad.

The gangly plant -- once a favorite of military ropemakers -- couldn't catch a break. Even as legalized medical marijuana has become more and more commonplace, the industrial hemp plant -- with its minuscule levels of the chemical that gives marijuana its kick -- has remained illegal to cultivate in the United States.

Enter the lost hemp diaries.

Found recently at a garage sale outside Buffalo but never publicly released, these journals chronicle the life of Lyster H. Dewey, a botanist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture whose long career straddled the 19th and 20th centuries. Dewey writes painstakingly about growing exotically named varieties of hemp -- Keijo, Chinamington and others -- on a tract of government land known as Arlington Farms. In effect, he was tending Uncle Sam's hemp farm.

What's gotten hemp advocates excited about the discovery is the location of that farm. A large chunk of acreage was handed over to the War Department in the 1940s for construction of the world's largest office building: the Pentagon. So now, hempsters can claim that an important piece of their legacy lies in the rich Northern Virginia soil alongside a hugely significant symbol of the government that has so enraged and befuddled them over the years.

All thanks to Lyster Dewey.

A small trade group, the Hemp Industries Association, bought Dewey's diaries. The group's leaders hope that displaying them for the first time on Monday -- the start of what they've decreed the "1st Annual Hemp History Week" -- will convince the universe that hemp is not a demon weed and was used for ropes on Navy ships and for World War II parachute webbing. The ultimate goal is to spur the government to lift the ban on hemp production, a policy that especially riles activists because foreign-produced hemp oils and food products can be legally imported.

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Dewey lived, at various times, in Washington's Petworth and Shaw neighborhoods. In photographs discovered along with the diaries, he cuts a dapper figure in suit coats with vests and a top hat, or merrily pedaling a bicycle with the District's iconic rowhouses behind him.

Dewey's meticulously labeled diaries start in 1896 and end in 1944, the year of his death at age 79. They read like artifacts of a bygone Washington. In 1937, he goes "downtown by street car and up the avenue past the White House to see the beautiful reproduction of Andrew Jackson's 'Hermitage,' which will be President Roosevelt's reviewing stand tomorrow, then down to the Capitol to see the inaugural stands."

Adam Eidinger, a consultant to the hemp association, stores the diaries in two sturdy, combination-locked cases. Pages are held together by fraying oxblood leather covers; others live in drab, gray notebooks.

"I'm getting the impression he was very disciplined," Eidinger says. "He was hands-on -- preferred digging around in Arlington Farms, rather than being in the office."

As early as 1914, Dewey writes of inspecting hemp at Arlington Farms. For nearly a quarter-century, he carefully notes his q uotidian progress as a grower and hemp advocate: "Thursday, October 19, 1922. Fair, cool. Go to Arlington Farm on the 9 a.m. bus and work all day," he wrote. "Harvesting Kymington, Yarrow, Tochigi, Tochimington, Keijo and Chinamington hemp."

The most powerful piece of evidence for hemp activists might be a photograph contained in an album with a battered black cover. In it, Dewey poses next to a stand of 13-foot-tall hemp plants. The caption reads: " Measuring a hemp plant 4 m. high. Arlington Farm. Aug, 28, 1929." In a dress shirt with cuff links and tie, he looks every bit the part of the proud gentleman farmer.

None of this might have come to light if not for sheer luck and a sequence of coincidences. It all starts last summer at a yard sale in Amherst, N.Y., 15 minutes outside Buffalo, where a man named David Sitarski was prowling for small treasures. For decades, Sitarski has dreamed of starting a Web site that archives historical artifacts from the Buffalo area.

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Even though he'd recently been laid off from his computer-equipment manufacturing job of 20 years, Sitarski decided to pay $130 for the diaries and one of the two albums, thinking they pertained to Buffalo. He would have bought the second photo album, but another man snatched it up.

Six months later, Sitarski says, his wife spotted their yard-sale rival while running errands. Sitarski jumped out of the car and talked him into selling the photo album to complete his set. The man casually mentioned that there were hemp pictures within, and Sitarski started Googling. He didn't make the Pentagon connection, but he quickly figured out that Dewey was a crucial hemp pioneer. Still jobless and needing money, Sitarski listed the material on eBay, asking $10,000.

A second man with a dream emerged: Michael Krawitz, a 47-year-old disabled veteran from the town of Ferrum in southwest Virginia. Krawitz has spent 10 years scheming to build a hemp museum that he hopes will inspire construction of similar museums throughout the world. "I picture myself with a team of people dragging some hemp artifact out of a mountain in Tibet," he says. He spotted Sitarski's listing but, alas, there was no way he could afford it.

But the hemp association could. The group has a sugar daddy: David Bronner, president of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, which has grown from a $5 million company to a $31 million firm in the past decade since adding hemp oil to its products to "improve skin feel" and produce a smoother lather. Bronner agreed to pay about $4,000 for the trove -- an easy call, given his court battles with the Drug Enforcement Administration when it tried to ban food products containing hemp. Bronner was also arrested last October after planting hemp seeds on a lawn at DEA headquarters.

"It's kind of ironic that we dug up DEA's lawn to plant hemp seeds and highlight the absurdity of the drug war, but you take it back 50 years and that's what the government itself was doing," Bronner says in an interview from his company's Southern California headquarters.

Krawitz tried to deliver the Dewey materials to the D.C. hempsters in February, but he got stuck in the "Snowmageddon" storm that paralyzed the area. Finally, when the weather cleared, he made it to Eidinger's Adams

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Morgan apartment.

Feeling like this would be a Moment, they pulled out a video camera and began to sift through the materials with Eric Steenstra, president of Vote Hemp, a nonprofit dedicated to changing hemp cultivation laws. Each turn of the page brought Dewey into sharper focus.

It didn't take long for Eidinger to conclude they'd found "a major gem" and a kindred spirit. He thought: "I can totally relate to this guy."

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