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**Cyrus Hall McCormick - Inventor and
Salesman**

Lead: Denied a renewal on his patent for a mechanical reaper in 1848, Cyrus McCormick transformed himself into a marketing genius and blew the competition away.

Intro.: "A Moment in Time" with Dan Roberts.

Content: In the early 1800s the harvesting of grain had not caught up with other agricultural improvements. You could grow grain in great abundance, particularly in the rich soils of the newly settled mid-west, but getting it out of the ground was a

problem. Harvesting wheat was labor intensive. If you could find workers, slave or free, they were very expensive in proportion to the revenue generated by the crop. The first commercially practical reaper for the harvesting of wheat was invented in Rockbridge County, Virginia in 1831 by Cyrus Hall McCormick, the studious and clever son of a blacksmith. It consisted of a vibrating cutting blade, a reel to bring the stalks within reach and a platform to receive the falling grain. This basic design has changed but little in the years since. McCormick took out a patent in 1834 but lost interest until hard times forced him in the late 1830s to consider exploiting his invention. He sold several but discovered that during his absence

others had entered the market most especially Obed Hussey whose design was different and whose reaper was popular in Pennsylvania and New York.

In 1844 McCormick visited the mid-west and concluded that region would be the best place to concentrate his efforts. Three years later he built a factory in the small, swampy town of Chicago on shores of Lake Michigan and sold 800 machines in the first year alone. When he was denied the renewal of his original patent McCormick decided that since the basic design was now in the public domain he could only make his fortune if he could improve the machine and beat the competition in sales. While

Hussey would only adopt changes of his own devising, McCormick would buy the rights to improvements from other inventors and quickly get them onto the machines and out to the customer. He was an extraordinary salesman and by 1856 he was selling 4000 machines a year. When he died in 1884 the McCormick reaper dominated the market. Cyrus McCormick was more than a businessman and inventor. He was active in the Democratic Party and in his church. Before his death he endowed McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

From the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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