

GROWERTALKS

Corr on Cannabis

5/1/2021

The Fraught History of Cannabis

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The best-known quote of the philosopher George Santayana is: “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” But he also said, “History is a pack of lies about events that never happened told by people who weren’t there.”

Much of the history of cannabis is like that—perhaps not outright lies, but a mix of facts and myth, told by people who weren’t there, or if they were, don’t remember.

Nevertheless, myth or fact, the story told of how cannabis got to where it is today is certainly interesting.

Archeologists and historians can document cannabis use dating back many millennia. Cannabis likely was the first plant used for fiber for cloth, rope, paper, etc. There’s evidence of cannabis cloth from Mesopotamia dating

back 10,000 years. The word “canvas” and the word “cannabis” have the same Latin origin.

The Chinese were the first people to develop techniques for making paper and cannabis fibers were an ingredient. (The introduction of papermaking was a great relief to the sheep and goats whose skins were used for parchment.)

It’s more difficult to trace the origins of recreational or medicinal use of cannabis, but there are records that the Chinese used cannabis for those purposes thousands of years ago. Shen-Nung, known as the Father of Chinese Medicine, described medical uses for cannabis around 2700 BCE, including for treatment of gout, rheumatism and malaria. The ancient Egyptians used cannabis to treat diseases of the eyes and to reduce inflammation.

Sometime during the first century of the current era, a Greek physician named Dioscorides included cannabis in “De Materia Medica,” a five-volume book describing herbal medicines. It was translated into the common languages of the day and served the medical profession until the Renaissance period 1,500 years later.

By the time Europeans were establishing permanent settlements in North America in the 1600s, cannabis was an established crop, primarily for fiber, but also for medical purposes. The Virginia colony rewarded cannabis culture and the manufacturing of fiber, and imposed penalties on those who didn’t produce it.

By 1850, the United States had its own pharmacopoeia, a book listing medicines and their uses. Cannabis was listed as treatment for numerous afflictions, including neuralgia, tetanus, typhus, cholera, rabies, dysentery, alcoholism, anthrax, leprosy, incontinence, gout, convulsive disorders, tonsillitis, insanity and even for treating opiate

addiction. An 1889 article in the medical journal *The Lancet* confirmed the use of cannabis for the treatment of opium withdrawal symptoms.

During World War I, the United States was cut off from overseas supplies of cannabis and needed to become self-sufficient in supplying cannabis for medical use. During the war, pharmaceutical farms produced approximately 60,000 pounds of cannabis annually for medical purposes.

History turns in strange ways. Although the United States imposed a prohibition on the sale of alcoholic beverages from 1920 to 1933, cannabis remained legal. However, besides bathtub gin, there was trouble brewing for cannabis.

About the time Prohibition ended, the newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst and other industrialists, possibly including the DuPont family, began a campaign against cannabis. Farm equipment had recently been developed, which greatly improved the harvesting of cannabis for fiber. Hearst had financial interests in the lumber and paper industries, both of which could be threatened by increased growth of cannabis for fiber. DuPont had recently developed methods for making nylon fabric, which competed against fabric made with hemp fibers.

At the same time, the Great Depression, with massive unemployment, fueled animosity against minority groups, including Mexican Americans.

Newspapers owned by Hearst began to publish sensational reports of violent acts committed by people under the influence of cannabis, especially acts committed by minorities. Hearst ensured the word “cannabis” was no longer used in his newspapers, substituting the word marijuana, associated with Mexican immigrants. The film “Reefer Madness” was released in 1936, showing cannabis use resulted in manslaughter, suicide, conspiracy to murder, attempted rape and hallucinations.

Soon, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics Commissioner Harry Anslinger amplified the campaign against cannabis, eventually resulting in the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937 (marihuana is an alternate spelling of marijuana). This act regulated the importation, cultivation, possession and/or distribution of cannabis.

The American Medical Association (AMA) attempted to block the act because they found no evidence of marijuana addiction, violence or overdose. The legislative counsel for the AMA testified the medical profession was initially unaware of the significance of the act since the word marijuana was largely unknown. In testimony, he said, “Marijuana is not the correct term ... the burden of this bill is placed heavily on the doctors and pharmacists of this country.”

Nevertheless, the tax act passed. Perhaps to no one’s surprise, the first person arrested under the act was Moses Baca, a Mexican American sentenced to 18 months for possession of a quarter ounce of cannabis.

By 1942, cannabis had been removed from the U.S. Pharmacopeia.

But fate is fickle, and as soon as cannabis was removed from the pharmacopeia, the United States was in dire need of additional fiber, since overseas supplies were largely disrupted by World War II. And the “Hemp for Victory” campaign was launched, once again making growing cannabis a patriotic duty. Farmers were encouraged to grow as much cannabis as possible for rope and cloth. Hundreds of thousands of acres were planted each year during the war.

Once World War II ended, planting cannabis for fiber quickly decreased, and the war on cannabis largely ended, or at least reached a temporary ceasefire.

The ceasefire came to an end during the Nixon administration, even though the National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse, appointed by Nixon, recommended cannabis possession should be decriminalized. Instead, the administration launched the “War on Drugs,” resulting in the Controlled Substances Act classification of cannabis as

a drug with "... a high potential for abuse, no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States, and a lack of accepted safety ..."

And that's where cannabis remains today, classified by the federal government as a Schedule I drug, with "no currently accepted medical use" despite the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services filing a patent in 2003 claiming intellectual property protection for the use of cannabinoids for treatment of "ischemic, age-related, inflammatory and autoimmune diseases" including Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease and others.

But history repeats itself. After removing cannabis from the U.S. Pharmacopeia almost 80 years ago, the United States Pharmacopeial Convention (USP) began work in 2016 to establish a framework for the consistent characterization of cannabis for medical use and therefore add it back to the U.S. Pharmacopeia. A year ago (April 2020), a group of scientists published a paper outlining USP considerations for quality attributes for medical cannabis.

In the words of William Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Shen-Nung, the ancient Egyptians and Dioscorides would agree. **GT**

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