

**Hemp-ty handed**

The Lakota Native Americans had their sustainable cash crops dug up by the U.S. government. Happy Independence Day.

By Leah Pietrusiak



**FARM HANDS** The duo behind *Standing Silent Nation* hope the film will help legalize the growing of industrial hemp.

“I was one of those people who thought hemp was marijuana that you made it into a piece of clothing,” admits Courtney Hermann, a Columbia College film grad. “I thought, Oh, once it’s in a product, it’s not like you can smoke the shirt that you’re wearing.”

Even if you did, the less than one percent of THC wouldn’t get you high (planting industrial hemp near marijuana plants actually lowers the next generation’s THC level). But since industrial hemp—whose fiber can be used to make things like paper, clothing and biodegradable plastic—was lumped in with marijuana under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, it’s illegal to grow it in the U.S.

In 2000, the Lakota Indians on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota—a sovereign nation with an 85 percent unemployment rate, and whose 45,000 residents depend mainly on food rations—planted the crop (barley and alfalfa stripped too many nutrients from the soil). Three months later at harvest time, Drug Enforcement Agency officials came in with helicopters and M15s, pulled the plants out and took them away. The action resulted in a loss of over \$160,000; and the Lakota couldn’t deliver to companies like Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soap, which usually imports hemp from countries like Canada (it’s illegal to grow hemp in the U.S., but it is legal to distribute it).

Hermann and Suree Towfighnia captured the plight of one Lakota family in the documentary *Standing Silent Nation*, which will make its national TV premiere Tuesday 3 on PBS.

The film, which airs the day before Independence Day, features a “Hemp for Victory” PSA from World War II which encourages “patriotic farmers” to grow hemp for the war effort, and to compete against China. What’s more, this year is the 400th anniversary of the Jamestown settlement, whose residents were required to grow hemp for its more than 25,000 identified uses.

“It’s about the hypocrisies of America: We preach freedom, yet they can’t have self-sustainability because, what, it threatens America?” says Towfighnia, who researched industrial hemp for a graduate film class at Columbia College. “They’re protecting the land, trying to protect their traditions... [while we’re] importing from China and shopping at Wal-Mart.”

Alex White Plume was due to harvest a hemp crop in August of 2002, so Towfighnia followed directions to “take 90 west, and call when you get to the Badlands.” She arrives shortly after the DEA cited Alex’s family for trying to grow hemp for the third year in a row. She quickly put a mike on Alex, and filmed as news arrived. It’s these shots—as well as ones of horse races, buffalo (fed with hemp), planting ceremonies, and Alex joking about handing documents to the judge on hemp paper—that bring the White Plume family to life.

The filmmakers, who camped on the reservation, quickly found out how prairie dust can creep into camera equipment and turn a green car brown (thus the name of their production company, Prairie Dust Films); how there’s no fresh fruit or vegetables for miles (but no lack of Spam and soda); and how their new friends often didn’t have the money to pay their electric bills for their cramped quarters. “People

want to believe that because Indians have casinos, we're rich, but we're not," says Alex's sister, Ramona.

A Texas congressman introduced a bill two years ago that would distinguish hemp from marijuana, but there has been little congressional support. The White Plumes decided not to take their case to the Supreme Court, and instead have dedicated themselves to pressuring Congress to change the law—which is the reason Hermann and Towfighnia want to show the film wherever they can. "I just want to get the situation on Pine Ridge to improve. I want my family—my Lakota extended family—to have opportunities," says Towfighnia. "All they're doing is trying to make a future for the next seven generations."

*Watch Standing Silent Nation Tuesday 3 at 10pm on PBS. Visit [prairiedustfilms.com](http://prairiedustfilms.com).*