



Cotton gin job means more than a dollar in the pocket of these troubled young men

The chance to earn an honest wage while helping others became reality for several teens during cotton harvest in southeast Missouri last fall.

Eighteen young men and three adults spent their days and nights ginning cotton at the Vanduser Cotton Gin in Vanduser, Mo, for 10 weeks. Then, on Dec. 10, they headed back home to the Anchor Academy for Boys Camp in Havre, Mont.

These are not your typical teenagers. Dennis McElwrath, academy co-founder, says youth who stay at the academy come from very difficult backgrounds. "Some of these guys have never had a family to care about them and have been tossed from aunts to uncles to foster care," he says. "They end up in trouble, skipping school, running away from home, defiant to

their parents. Some have trouble with the law in terms of shoplifting and other small crimes.

"We bring them in for a minimum of one year and focus on putting their lives back together."

Last year there were 62 students at the academy. The group's Missouri venture is a new attempt to instill a responsible work ethic in the teenage boys. The connection to Missouri came from McElwrath, who grew up in the Bootheel, about 30 miles south of Dexter. In the opposite direction and to the northeast is Vanduser.

He contacted gin manager Jim



Johnson out of the blue early last year with a proposal. "At the time we were at a crossroads by having more cotton than we could gin the way we had been doing it," says Johnson of the ginning plant. "We were going to have to change the way we were doing things and go to 24 hours a day. Dennis hit us at the opportune moment."

McElwrath and his group received land from a local church, set up a modular home, and began working two shifts – day and night – ginning cotton.

Johnson originally had his reservations about letting lose a group of young men who have had troubles with authority. So, before hiring the crew, he went to Montana to check the academy out for himself. What he found was a former Air Force Strategic Air Command base the academy has taken over and is renovating.

"I spent a few days watching



At left and above, working in a cotton gin was a new experience for the 18 teenage men who worked day and night shifts at the Vanduser Gin last fall. This is also the first time any group, from Anchor Academy in Havre, Mont., has gone outside of their local area to work. Students experienced the responsibility of earning a living. Many of them, donated a percentage of their pay to the academy.



Jim and Suzy Johnson operate the Vanduser Gin Company in Vanduser. Hiring the students from Anchor Academy came at an opportune time for the gin, which was looking at ways to expand the plant to a 24-hour a day operating capacity during harvest. Doing so allowed the gin to keep up with the record-breaking cotton harvest last fall.

them,” said Johnson of the kids. “I saw that he (McElwrath) could control these young men. They branded cattle one day when I was there. None of them knew which end of the calf to grab, but before the day was over, every one of those kids did it.”

The experience convinced him to hire them. The decision paid off last fall when weather and a number of other factors came together to produce a record-breaking cotton harvest. One of the academy staff attended ginning school at Johnson’s urging. Johnson also showed the younger men the ins-and-outs of ginning cotton.

By the end of the season in mid-December, the northern-most cotton gin in the Mississippi Delta processed and shipped nearly 20,000 bales of cotton ready for millers.

The money earned by McElwrath and his students also benefits the academy. “The work in Missouri is to benefit the program. These young men are getting paid and they can choose to donate a percentage back. A lot of the projects we do in Montana we don’t get paid for, we just do it to be a help – to teach these boys about being good neighbors and helping those around you who have a need,” says McElwrath.

He says the kids working in Missouri understand how much effort is put into helping and caring for them. “What happens is they get to a place where they begin to think

about other people. They also learn the value of a dollar.

“In terms of life skills, in terms of character, in terms of discipline in getting up every morning on time to show up at work – these boys have learned a lot,” says McElwrath.

The students sacrificed earlier in the year for the opportunity to work in Missouri. Those who volunteered had to meet several requirements. When other students took their summer break, these kids spent an additional 10 weeks in school so they could work full-time in the fall.

When they were not working 12 hour shifts six days a week, they would shop for supplies, write or call their parents, and go swimming when they could. Sundays, however, were spent visiting and singing at churches throughout the area.

McElwrath initially thought parents would have concerns, instead they asked him to take their son to work in Missouri, so they could learn “money doesn’t come off of a tree in the backyard,” he explained.

The working experiment for the mostly 16 and 17 year-old men went well and McElwrath is interested in bringing the group back next harvest if the gin owners are agreeable. Johnson, for one, is ready to have them back. “They have rough backgrounds,” he says of the young men, “but out here, after we got to know each other a little bit, why it is just amazing.”

Ginning Cotton



Farmers use special harvesters to pick the cotton from the field.



The cotton is dumped from field wagons to modular wagons that roll the cotton off the wagon in large stacks at the gin.



Dirt, seeds, hulls and other particles are removed from the cotton as it runs through the cotton gin, also called ginning.



The end product is clean cotton tightly pressed and tied into bales.



The bales are stacked in trucks and shipped to large warehouses where they are distributed worldwide to millers to make fabric.