

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Corn: Wonder Crop of Then and Now



Corn is a product of the Americas. Native Americans domesticated it around 10,000 years ago, and by the time European colonists arrived in this hemisphere, the plant had been transported from Mexico all the way to New England. Its importance from the colonial period until the current day is noteworthy.

In the 18th century, settlers learned how to propagate and use corn from native peoples. Early colonists were taught how to plant kernels in small holes with little fish covering them. The fish acted as fertilizer. Corn grew fast, was adaptable and nourishing, and saved many settlers from starvation.

It cannot be overemphasized how difficult it was to settle a farm on the frontier when the first immigrants arrived in North America. After a rough shelter was built, pens for livestock had to be constructed, and a garden had to be cleared and fenced to keep out predators. This involved chopping, sawing, digging up stumps and roots, removing stones, and girdling large trees. The ground required tilling and plowing before seeds were planted. Corn became an essential crop, partially because it could be grown in rougher soil where smaller grain would not thrive, and also because it grew quickly and towered over the weeds around it, blocking them out with its tall stalks and broad abundant leaves.

Fresh corn was eaten by boiling it in water or milk when ripe. Or it could be grated and made into bread. In the fall corn was ground into meal (either by hand with a pestle or at a water powered mill) or else shelled from the ears and preserved. Sometimes it was made into pudding, mush, or dumplings. Also, it was used to feed horses, cattle, and hogs. The tops of stalks were saved, dried, and fed to livestock as winter nourishment. No part of the ear was discarded. Early mattresses were formed from corn shucks, and empty cobs were used as kindling for fires, as tobacco pipes, or as toilet wipes before toilet tissue was invented. Cobs were also fashioned into children's toys such as "cob houses" or dolls; and kernels were used as game pieces in checkers and other games. At times kernels were tools in elections to count votes in a ballot box.

Another use for corn involved sprouting the kernels, grinding them with sprouted barley and making malt. The malt, mixed with sugar and water fermented into beer. When the beer was heated, the alcohol later could be refined into whiskey or moonshine. So besides providing solid nourishment, corn could be ingested in liquid form too. It was an extremely variable and adaptable plant, and there were many uses for it in olden days.

Today corn is a staple crop around the world and is currently the largest crop in the U.S. Landmark developments have dramatically increased corn production. Instead of allowing the plant to pollinate itself through the wind, researchers created strains of self-pollinating hybrids ensuring consistency and uniformity. No longer are kernels manually planted and harvested or put in and out of the soil with planters pulled by livestock; rather mechanized planters, tractors, combines, and pickers have made growing operations speedier and more productive. Herbicides and pesticides prevent damage to young seedlings (though there is some controversy about the use of these chemicals). Large scale agriculture has brought about many changes in corn farming practices.



Corn is used in more products than any other grain. Its kernel is used in many foods, as livestock feed and on American tables in numerous forms: on the cob, canned, frozen, in cereal, corn syrup, margarine, mayonnaise, salad dressing, cooking oil, soup, chips, puddings, jellies and jams, bread, popcorn, and bubble gum. Many non-food products contain corn including soap, crayons, plastics, glue, medicine, paint, shoe polish, batteries, disposable diapers, and laundry starch. The food and non-food products containing corn number in the thousands.

Because more acres in the USA are planted in corn than any other crop, it has the nickname "King Corn". This high yielding plant is versatile and valuable and has a long history. The crop has been celebrated with festivals, arranged into mazes, and inspired songwriters. At this time of year, Oklahoma's lyrics ring true: "The corn is as high as an elephant's eye, and it looks like it's climbing clear up to the sky." Corn is truly amazing.