

# The Artist's Almanac

July 2005

*O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain!*  
Katherine Lee Bates

Summer is upon us.

Cousin Allen brought in fresh yellow squash, new potatoes, a huge head of cabbage and cucumbers, which Claudia marinated in sugared vinegar as a side dish for a vegetable dinner with iced tea. Later this month there'll be corn on the cob, to be boiled straightway and slathered with soft butter, salted and devoured.

Roses are in their second flush of bloom and daylilies spread their luxuriant gold. Watermelons are sweet and pear trees bend with pendulous fruit. But the pick of the garden, Tennessee tomatoes, ripen mid month and we can't get enough of them.

It's been dry. Tommy Barton says he's never seen the creek this low. He and Owen took Hayden to the spring-fed Cold Hole, where the boy enjoyed wading and catching crawdads more than the bream. He said it was the *funnest day of his life*.

The dry weather suits the haymakers, as long as it doesn't turn into a drought. The rolled bales are placed at just the right intervals on the stubbled hill fields to please the artist.

Artists have always liked hay. Millet's peasants binding the sheaves, gleaning, or pausing to say the *Angelus* are artistic icons. Monet rendered his famous haystacks in every light. Nearer to home Thomas Hart Benton, whose grandfather left Nashville because of a near-duel with Andrew Jackson, counted *July Hay* as one of his most successful paintings. Tom came back to his roots to complete the mural for Nashville's Country Music hall of Fame the very day he died.

Haying evolved from loose sheaves through stacks to square bales. These cubed mechanical excretions are not very attractive to the artist. But windrows, those lines of cut grasses trailing the mower, drying as they await baling, are another matter, naturally caressing the curve of the earth's bosom. Today, rolled bales restore hay to the artist's repertoire, cocked as they are at their jaunty angles and displaying the texture, colors and shadows of grass.

Grass is the sun's natural child. It is friend to both the land and to the landscape artist. Whether pastured or baled, grass protects our topsoil from eroding and it is more sparing of soil nutrients and fertilizer than are the money crops of corn and cotton. It is converted to milk and meat by the grazing herds on thousands upon thousands of Tennessee hillsides. Grass is our state's biggest crop and is a reliable friend to our economy.

Our economy was much on the minds of the farmers and merchants of our land who set off the first fireworks in Massachusetts in the 1770's. When Mad King George determined to reduce his colonists to tax vassalage, they weren't having it. One thing led to another, with blockades, boycotts, firefights, and forced quartering of troops, until July of 1776, when the representatives of the thirteen colonies gathered in Philadelphia to give us a national holiday like no other.

How a ragtag gathering of short-term militia outlasted the strongest military force in the world is a miracle we still cannot get over today. Defeat, disease, desertions, disloyalty, and retreat were Washington's weekly agendas – New York, New Jersey, Charleston, Boston, and Philadelphia. His second-in-command, Gen. Gates, counseled surrender. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, was minutes from capture at his hilltop Monticello by the British cavalry that he could see ravaging through Charlottesville below.

Yet in a day when leaders led from the front, George Washington shook bullets from his greatcoat after battles, but was never scratched. At one time his Continentals were down to 1,000 barefoot and starving effectives, yet he never quit. At each low point, we were saved by stunning victories – Trenton, Saratoga, King's Mountain. The greatest of these, Yorktown, presents a confluence of events the probability of which a statistician might measure as one in a thousand.

General Nathaniel Greene harried Cornwallis into backing into the Yorktown peninsula of Virginia where the British Fleet could support him. Force marching his little Continental army and militias south, Washington persuaded the hitherto idle French regiments under Rochambeau in Rhode Island to accompany him in enveloping the British. Meanwhile, the French fleet in the Caribbean under Admiral De Grasse was brought up for a mere two weeks to blockade the British from the sea.

The timing was perfect. The French fleet was gone in a matter of days. The huge British fleet arrived shortly with reinforcements. But it was too late. Cornwallis had surrendered his army, effectively ended the fighting in America. We were free.

We have hot, humid days in Tennessee in July. But things cool down after dark and the starry skies are visible after the last light fades about 9:30-10. On the evening of the Fourth of July I will gather as many children and grandchildren as I can in the recently mown hay field on a hill overlooking the river to watch the fireworks shows- at Fairvue, the Boy Scout Camp, Lebanon, Mt. Juliet, Hendersonville and Nashville - and recount to them once more the miracle which set freedom loose in the world.

Let the fireworks begin!

*America! America! God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea!*

