

The Artist's Almanac

September 2006

**Crown'd with the sickle, and the sheaten sheaf,
While Autumn, nodding o'er the yellow plain,
Comes jovial on.**

- James Thomson, *Autumn*, 1730

Fog shrouds the valley this morning and the ponies in the field are wading in it. Later it will condense to dew my shoes as I come from filling their water bowl. Crickets, crows and cobwebs are out and the roses are reviving as days grow cooler.

At noon, shotguns report the opening of dove season. Shouts of *o-verr* and *low bird!* signal the action. Afterwards, there will be beer and barbecue as scores are tallied and tall tales are told of other hunts and hunters. The game warden, who found no baiting sheaves of wheat scattered in the stubble, is invited to join.

We call our sheaves shocks, and our grain, except for dove fields, is corn. We've seen it grow this year from green shoots to tasselling. As the ears swell we watch for the silk to brown, telling us it's time to pull and strip them, bursting with sweet juice, and pop them into boiling water. Corn on the cob is summer's first prize, with watermelon close second.



It is the artist's challenge to see things seen by all, but undiscovered. Commonness camouflages the glory surrounding us. The Indians who gave us corn took nothing for granted. They marked each of its stages with festivals – from the moons of planting and tasselling to those of green corn and grinding. Corn was an annual miracle.

Our ancestors who first settled this green valley celebrated it as well. Next to children, their most precious crop was corn. They were wayfarers and adventurers, in search of land and freedom. In their saddlebags they brought parched corn, to sustain them on the way, as well as their precious seed corn. The family that planted corn before 1780 was thereby entitled to a preemption of land. Their crops would furnish them food, fodder for

stock, whiskey for medicine, meal to fuel their horses, with perhaps some left over for shipping and trade.

Corn is unique among grains: its very survival depends upon man. Other grains will be scattered and re-sown by wind or birds. Not corn. While an ear of corn which drops into the ground may sprout, its seedlings will come so thickly they will smother each other out and be unable to reach maturity and fruition. Corn must be planted by man, either in hills, as did the Indians, or in machine drills, as today.

Today as hay, cattle, tobacco and other agriculture retreat before the bulldozers and industrial development, corn remains. Mankind has both adopted and adapted it. Just as the early settlers found it more profitable to convert corn to meat for sale or consumption or to whiskey for medicine and export, we now convert it to every conceivable industrial and commercial product - food, drink, fiber, fuel, fixative, powder, lubricants, packaging, medicine, construction, environmental cleanup and renewable energy. All are either made of or use corn in their manufacturing process. Corn is as much a product of industry as of agriculture.

The earliest guide and leader of the settlers who came to grow their corn and children along the Cumberland was Isaac Bledsoe. The Indians, while they respected him as a courageous leader of the settlers, knew that he represented a threat to their hunting and to their old way of life. He came bringing boundaries, houses, children, crops, government, and the Rule of Law. Respected by the Indians as he was, he, as a chief of the settlers, was ambushed and killed outside his own fort by tribesmen in their futile war against encroachment. Always on the go, Bledsoe was called *Tullatoska* by the Indians, meaning blade of corn or perpetual motion

September is a month in motion. Cooler days beckon us from within doors and we travel to games, golf and tailgate parties, The sun's warmth is once more welcome. Trees change their dresses, before discarding them for next year's fashions. This is a time, not just for harvesting, but for planting new grass seed, for exploring, visiting, moving about, for meeting new people and old friends. As our horizons open we are reminded anew that the best time to be on the move, whether among new scenes or ideas, projects or people, is Indian Summer.

