

# Maize Finders, Ancient and Anonymous

*Agriculture*

PAUL DE KRUIF, in *Hunger Fighters* (Knopf):

What fighters of hunger can compare to the unknown finders of the American maize?

Of all green living things maize is the chief trapper of the energy of the sun's rays. Eaten as corn and bread, and turned into four-legged beasts and their milk, made into two-legged fowl and their eggs, maize is the principal food of the people of the western continents.

What sort of man or woman first found this maize? Wondrous lusty: it shoots from a seed to the size of a tree in less than three months. Tough is this Indian corn: it sends out new leaves after spring frosts and laughs at the cold nights of October. Resourceful: it yields three hundredfold on the soggy lands along the lower Mississippi—and it sends down long tap roots to hunt and find moisture in the southwest lands where there is no rain.

What brown-faced genius with straight black hair first learned to guard the maize? For of all green things this strong helper of man is the weakest: the Indian corn plant is more dependent on man than the most absurd poodle. A thousand times more domestic is the maize than the most helpless goldfish: without endless storing, hoeing, reaping, saving, and sowing by men, this plant would die out—utterly. Unlike wheat, unlike any food giving life to men, there is no wild maize: none has ever been known to escape the hands of men to grow free. It can't grow free. With heavy kernels tight on a cob and enclosed by enormous husks, no wind that blows can scatter the seed of it broadcast; untended by man, the young plants—though so vigorous—are killed off by grass in a jiffy.

But who first knew all that? What kind of prophet with what strange insight was this first aboriginal American with high cheekbones who first felt the absolute need to save the maize, to store it, always to hoe it, knowing he must sow it again—knowing it would never rise by itself again through some kind quirk of God or trick of nature? . . .

From what wild plant could this Indian corn have come? Today there are fifty colleges where savants with their heads full of big-

named facts about maize study the chemistry of its life-stuff, the mathematics of its breeding. But never a one of them can breed corn from any wild plant—not even from the tasseled Mexican grass, teosinte. "To be wild," smiles Guy Collins, corn historian, slouched in his chair and sucking at his pipe, "any parent of the maize would have to be very unlike the maize itself!" So it's silly to search for the wild parent now. And it's foolish to guess the time of the birth and the finding of the maize—in Peru there exist fossilized ears of corn untold thousands of years old; from Iowa there are stories of ears of maize that have left their record in slate deposits deep underground. Yet, in some misty month when the world was young, a wild green plant changed suddenly into this delicate food plant that would surely have died out—left to itself. Or, for some months, or years, or hundreds of years, two unknown wild green tasseled grasses married and begat and conceived fantastic children that themselves were enormously fertile—but as helpless to survive as so many abandoned human babies. . . . In those mysterious days a man—or was it a woman?—happened by, a clod of a man, with a dirty face. It was an epic accident.

Who will ever know the language of that man's scientific report of the finding of the maize? Was it written? Or did he tell it in a mumble of low-pitched growls and a jumble of high-pitched grunts to a college of his mates held in the warmth of that new invention—fire? Or is maize older than tame fire?

Heaven knows how many thousands of years afterwards—after straight-haired Americans had nursed the flame of the seed of it all those thousands of years—new immigrant Americans, civilized white men, scrambled out of their boats on to the coast of eastern America—and took the maize. There was nothing scientific about their discovery but it was only a matter of their empty stomachs turning somersaults. It was the first bleak Massachusetts autumn for those Puritan white men: the going was hard. Then Miles Standish and his scouts, in despair how to fill their bellies, came upon fields of an outlandish new kind of grass tall as a tree. They stumbled over mounds, dug into them; looking over their shoulders in fear of

possible owners, they pulled out of the ground a little old basket filled with Indian corn. "We dug further," wrote their scribe, "and found a fine great new basket of very fair corn of that year—six and thirty goodly ears of corn, some yellow, some red, others mixed with blue, a very goodly sight."

Guarded by their flintlocks, they filled an old kettle with it, stuffed their wide pockets full of it, put it in their great hats, and Miles Standish and his God-fearing men scampered off with it believing it better to ask the Indians whether or no they might have it—afterwards. They were hungry. "And surely it was God's providence that we found this corn," wrote the recorder of the deeds of those pious Pilgrims, "for else we know not how we should have done. . . ."

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## The Camel's Hump

*Education*

M. S. DUDGEON in *Adult Education and the Library*, for July 1928:

The old theory of education has been termed the camel's hump process. Before starting on our journey of life, our minds were filled with knowledge, much as the camel fills his hump, and the supply was expected to endure and nourish us all the days of our life; as we went through the years we might become thinner and weaker intellectually, but we staggered on without any later sustenance or education

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Australia's population averages a little more than two people per square mile.

In India last year there were 1,033 men killed by tigers, and 1,068 tigers were killed by men.

A tortoise can live to be 350 years old, but no elephant has been known to live beyond 130 years.

So little ancient Greek jewelry has been discovered that the idea has been advanced that the Greek tombs may have been systematically raided centuries ago by thieves.

London's great epidemics of plague in the seventeenth century took off the poor; the wealthy and influential left the city, leaving the poor people unemployed and uncared for.