

# Daughter of Corn

## *The Remembered Landscape of my Youth*

by Corinne J. Stanley

**T**he whisper of corn at the cool break of day is the tenderest sound on earth. The emerald leaves twirling in the prairie breeze are a verdant ballet. Corn seduces the senses like no other grain. To smell the clean scent of corn as one walks through the fields on a dewy morning is like inhaling the twin breaths of earth and rain.

Equally stunning are the visual glories of corn, for it grows in a kaleidoscope of colors and sizes. Native Americans cultivated red, blue, black, and green corn. In Hawaii a variety of the corn plant shoots up from the earth completely adorned in purple hues; the stalk, leaves, and kernels shimmer with a musty, deep mauve. In Peru, 15-foot stalks flaunt their height on the slopes of the Andes. Here in the brisk midwestern autumns, we adorn our dining room tables and front doors with speckled Indian corn, never giving a thought to the 10,000-year history of a grain so sacred that its image was woven into blankets, etched onto pottery, and sung and danced to in glorious gratitude for its existence.

Is it any wonder that I should feel so passionate about corn?

**I** was raised in the small town of Washington in southeastern Iowa, where the fertile earth and its seasonal crops formed the landscape of our daily discourse. My father was a corn breeder in charge of research for Northrup King from Iowa to the East Coast. By the time I was eight, I knew how to thin fledgling corn plants with a metal rod and to hoe noxious weeds

that crowded the corn. I marveled at the strength of a cornstalk as it rose in ornery defiance after a flattening storm. As I edged into my teens, the feel of a smooth wooden hoe handle in my hand meant extra dollars in my pocket.

Working in the fields was a coming-of-age ritual as well as hard, demanding work. All over our county, teenagers weeded fields of soybeans and detasseled and pollinated corn. One summer we injected shots into the stalks of waist-high corn to prevent blight. Sometimes a few of us planted colorful flower beds at the Four Corners intersection on the edge of town. Bright rows of marigolds and chrysanthemums spelled out the letters NK for Northrup King.

During the height of pollination season in July, small crews of teenage girls rose at dawn to carry out the seed-corn experiments designed by my father and his colleagues. We poured into the parking lot at the field station each morning at 7:30. As the sun climbed in the sky, we took breaks on benches set up under wooden trestles topped with cornstalks for shade.

Occasionally a local male teacher or rare college jock joined our group. However, top executives of the company had deemed women as being more capable than men at handling the research experiments. I believe we were inclined to be more serious and perhaps less clumsy about carrying out the timely tasks necessary to produce objective results. I exercised my "male" analytical powers by interpreting coded instructions typed in a cardboard manual that I kept tucked in my canvas apron, and honed my "female" intuitive powers by determining when to initiate multiple pollinations.

The idea behind cross- or self-pollination is to pro-



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The author, in a green flowered dress, poses with a group of her friends from Washington, Iowa, in the late 1960s.

tect the corn silks from “undesirable” pollen flying in the wind and to instead pollinate them from a specified row, or section of rows, in the experimental plot. For 12 hours a day, we walked the long rows, watching for the shoots of corn emerging from the tall stalks. The moment the ear reached the size of an adult forefinger and baby-soft strands of silk began to spill out of the end, we used a knife to slice the silks, creating an even surface for the eventual pollination. Then we covered the tiny ear with a small plastic bag. We had already stapled paper bags over the tassels in the chosen rows, anticipating the yellow dance of pollen bursting from the male flowers. Within a few days, we uncovered the silks and shook the pollen we had collected in the paper bags onto the strands.

This kind of controlled experimentation was the only way to develop stronger, higher-yielding corn hybrids. We teenage girls learned to trust and respect ourselves as we took on the powerful role of “fertilization bees” during those sweltering Iowa summers. Out of necessity and pride, we wore tank tops and short-shorts, and none of us commented on the shape or size

of our bodies with competitive sneers. For nine years I trudged through the summer months with dirt clods clinging to my tennis shoes, my brain imprinted with the sound of rustling corn leaves.

Last summer my friend Kathy Wells told me a troubling story. Because she was the first female chosen to head a detasseling crew—something unheard of in our area in the late 1960s—a boy from her crew of male workers kept leaving obscene notes on her windshield. With the supervisor’s approval, another friend spied from behind tall cornstalks to witness who was putting the offensive notes on the truck. I was flabbergasted to learn that the culprit was my brother’s best friend, and that he was confronted and fired. But my friend’s days were not all filled with tension and mysterious offenses. Her crew also had great fun. One day a high, uncanny noise resounded throughout the fields. Pat Riesner, who played the bagpipes for the University of Iowa’s Scottish Highland-

ers, was running up and down the rows serenading the corn with her wheezing bagpipes.

For many of the young people in Washington during the Sixties, working in the cornfields was the enabling factor for attaining a college education. Recently a high school classmate told me that after her mother's unexpected death, she had to work doubly hard to earn money for her education. Often she left the cornfields at five in the evening and headed toward the bean fields for another five hours of work. Driving down country roads, one could see lights illuminating the paths of the workers, for the rush to get work completed was imminent.

**D**uring long days of bending and kneeling, our imagination and humor saved us from sinking into self-pity. When boredom set in, we played pranks. Not only the pollinators but the detasseling crews were famous for ingenuity. Once a group of kids literally lifted up the crew supervisor's Volkswagen Beetle and carried it a block away while he snoozed in City Park. When Floyd Woods awoke, the crew was granted a much longer lunch break as they joyfully watched him frantically search for the vehicle that had disappeared with such uncanny aplomb.

We created a hundred and one ways of leaning on a hoe and made up cornfield songs, such as "Lester, Lester Fester, King of the NK hoers," sung jauntily to the tune of "Davy Crockett" and dedicated to our supervisor. At the end of the season, we gathered for banquets and ceremonies, awarding prizes to the Fastest Hoer and the Pollen Queen. Each summer the close camaraderie we had developed extended into the weekends, with picnics at Lake Darling or parties to celebrate birthdays or engagements.

During those years of embracing the challenges of working in the fields, we traversed passage into adulthood, proving our abilities and self-worth. A keen sense of accomplishment formed the imprint for confidence and personal power, particularly for we female workers determined to prove our womanhood.

Our mission was sacred, and at the end of each day we returned to our homes baptized in a soft, yellow haze of pollen, from the waist up to the top of our heads—golden girls in youthful glimmer, all of us, walking testimony to the glory of corn. ❖

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