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# History of Corn

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## HISTORY OF CORN

by

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## A. Definition of the Word "Corn".

In the beginning, if we are to study corn, we must know what corn is. The meaning of words change very decidedly over a long period of years. For instance, in the distant part of European history "corn" meant any cereal crop including all the small grains, rye, barley, wheat or oats.

At the present day, however, we find we have a different meaning of the word. The term corn, as used in America, refers to maize or Indian corn.

Maize or Indian Corn is undoubtedly of American origin. Columbus found it growing in Hayti in 1492. History records many references to this crop by the explorers in the western hemisphere. The Indian tribes were growing it quite generally over the new world at the time the first explorers reached its various parts. How long corn had been grown in the new world before the coming of white man is not known. It has been a long time, as it has been found in mounds of the prehistoric tribes that long ago inhabited this western hemisphere. Samples of corn have been found in mounds in several parts of Ohio, in the abodes of the cliff dwellers of southwestern United States and in mounds left by the early tribes that inhabited the west coast of South America. It is, therefore, evident that corn is a crop that had furnished food for many generations of men before the advent of the present civilization. Indian corn was not known in the old world until it was introduced there after its discovery in the new world.

## B. What our corn came from:

No wild corn plants have ever been found! Two large, rank-growing, much-branched grasses bearing kernels very similar to the grains of our present day corn, in heavy tassels, have been found. These plants, Teosinte and Gamma grass, grow wild. In general appearance they closely resemble corn. A plant of greater likeness, however, is secured if these two plants are crossed. Gamma grass is distributed over the southern half of the United States and Mexico. It grows to a height of five to ten feet, the stem is slender and the leaf averages about two inches in width. The plant bears a tassel-like structure at the top and on lateral branches, and seeds are borne on the lower part of each tassel and the pollen on the upper part.

Teosinte is very much like Gamma grass in appearance but does not mature north of Mexico. The plant is much larger than Gamma grass, and the terminal tassel bears pollen only. The beginning of an ear is noticed in the form of a husk about the central stalk.

C. The native home of the corn plant:

The original home of the corn plant is not definitely known, but it is thought by scientists that it probably was in some part of Mexico. All evidence points to the fact that it was unknown in Europe until after the discovery of America. Its culture at an early period in this country is shown by the accounts of early explorers. Columbus, in writing to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1498 mentions corn fields in America 18 miles in length. Cartier in the account of his explorations, states that the village of Montreal was situated in the midst of large corn fields. De Soto found large fields in Florida in 1675 and five years later La Salle noted large supplies in what is now the state of Illinois.

It is generally accepted that corn originated in America and from America spread to every country of the world where it can be grown.

D. The development of the corn plant:

If we could picture the field of the first Indian corn as grown on the sod by the Indians and then compare that picture with a modern corn club boy in a prize acre of a high yielding corn, we can get some idea of the most marvelous development of their agricultural industry. Hundreds of men during the past generations have given a large part of their lives to the development of the corn plant. We, of the present day, may reap the benefits of their years of labor if we will but fit ourselves into the scheme of this industry. If we can get something of the history of corn development and then profit by the experience of others, we will be years and years ahead of our forefathers as regards corn development. We should give our forefathers full benefit for the development of the present day varieties as they continued to raise corn and gradually improve it.

Later in this course we will take up the subject of corn breeding and also the history in detail of variety improvement.

Summary:

We have studied something of the corn plant of prehistoric times. We note that "corn" originally was the term used for any cereal. At present in America corn refers to a cereal botanically and accurately known as Zea Mays, or common Indian corn.

Corn has developed from wild plants very unlike the corn plants of today. These original plants are known as Teosinte and Gamma grass and grow wild in Mexico. No wild corn plants have ever been found.

The native home of corn is thought to be Mexico. It has spread to every country of the world capable of growing this crop.

The development of the corn plant has brought about present day varieties by the continual selection, for years, by men giving their undivided attention to the improvement of corn.

References: "Corn Culture", George Livingston, Extension Service, University of Ohio, Columbus. "The Corn Crops", E. C. Montgomery.