



When Farmers Were Heroes
The Era of National Corn Husking Contests

A Teachers' Guide to the DVD Documentary

Created with the support of the Rock Island County (Illinois) Regional
Office of Education and written by Nancy Frakes

Introduction

Husking is the oldest method of harvesting corn. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, national corn husking contests drew over 100,000 spectators. *When Farmers Were Heroes: The Era of National Corn Husking Contests*, showcases this farm skill that was so important in the past. Values like individualism, determination, work ethic, and self-sufficiency were highlighted from the early 1920s through 1941 when popular local, state, and national corn husking contests were held. National contests were broadcast live on nation-wide network radio, and in 1936 *Time* magazine declared corn husking "... the fastest growing sporting spectacle in the world." Contest winners became idolized heroes who were sought after by national media for interviews, paid to endorse products, and received proposals of marriage from female fans.

The rise in popularity of corn husking contests and their role in buoying spirits during the Great Depression are unique in American history. This documentary, complete with original film, portrays the rich and

traditional farm heritage of corn husking. Farm historians in Illinois and Wisconsin have written books about this subject, but this is the first documentary created to visually bring the subject to life for students and the general public. The documentary is 25 minutes in length.

Goal:

To provide the story of corn husking contests so that students may learn about and appreciate the rich, traditional farm heritage of corn husking in the Midwest.

How to Use the Teacher's Guide

This guide has been developed to complement the video documentary, *When Farmers Were Heroes: The Era of National Corn Husking Contests*. It allows teachers to achieve the goal through the following steps.

- * Watch the documentary DVD
- * Teach the sample lessons included in the guide that are appropriate for your student's grade level in any of the five content areas provided:

Social Studies
Mathematics
Science
Geography
Language Arts

- * Discuss lesson outcomes with students

Lesson 1 — Social Studies

Corn husking and Corn husking Contests

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson students will be able to:

Define corn husking

Know how the corn was removed by hand

Learn how corn husking contests came about

Explain the rise and fall of these contests

Elementary

Know what corn husking is

Examine ears of corn

Learn the parts of an ear of corn

Middle/Junior High

Teach the above

Discuss the contests and why they came about

Know why the contests were halted in 1941

High School

Teach the above

Discuss the history of corn husking

Experience husking an ear of corn

What is Corn Husking?

The object of corn husking contests was to husk (take off the husk or leaves from the cob or ear) as much corn as possible from the rows of corn that were assigned to the contestant. At the sound of a horn or blast the contest began. Contestants had 80 minutes to husk ears of corn and

throw them into a wagon drawn by horses. The winner was the person who had the most bushels of corn after deductions. There were two main deductions: (1) ears of corn left in the row that were not picked and (2) husks that were left on the cob or ear. The total load was weighed. Then three pounds for every pound of corn left in the field were deducted. After sampling 100 ears of corn, one percent was deducted for each ounce of shuck over five ounces. Then that weight was divided by 70 to equal the number bushels harvested.

Contestants practiced many hours since the event required great skill and endurance. It was necessary to keep elbows close to the body and use mostly wrist action. A right-handed contestant would grab the ear with the left hand then run a hook across the ear to open up the husks. Then he or she would pull the husks down to remove them from the ear, then snap the husks from the stalk, and toss the ear into the wagon.

Have the students try their luck at husking corn:

- a. First make sure you have a garbage can or a big piece of plastic.
- b. Hold the ear with one hand.
- c. Grab the husk at the top of the ear.
- d. Pull the husk and silk down the ear all the way to the base of the ear.
- e. Snap the husk and silk off and toss the ear into a pile.

Corn Husking Past and Present

The only way a farmer could to harvest corn prior to the 1920s was to husk the corn by hand. There were no pickers or combines for the farmer to

use and sometimes at social gatherings, men would brag about how many bushels of corn they could harvest. Soon corn husking became a competitive sport.

Beginning in the 1920s, many county and state corn husking contests were held. Winners of state contests went on to participate in the annual national contests. Corn husking contests became an important form of entertainment for the whole family. Men became heroes, women became fans, vendors sold food, and companies displayed a wide range of farm supplies and equipment. Everyone had a good time at these events.

These contests ended after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. After the war, mechanical pickers and combines became widely available to farmers, thus making corn husking obsolete.

In 1970, corn husking contests were renewed. Today nine states have joined the national corn husking competition and each year the contest takes place in a different state. In 1975, there were 400 spectators who watched ten contestants, each hoping to become the champion of corn husking. In 2008, 900 people attended the national contest held near Roseville, Illinois.

Many people believe the event connects them to their heritage of the past. It also benefits the whole family and children learn to appreciate the history of farming.

Discussion Questions

1. Did the cornhuskers demonstrate work ethic, moral values and discipline? Is this true today for farmers? Why or why not? What kind of competitions do farmers have today? Are they entertaining? Are they for the whole family?

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having competitions as a social function for the family? Do you think corn husking contests will become a big event to help everyone remember an important chapter in agricultural history? Is it important to revisit, learn and remember what happened in the past? Why or why not?
3. Are the heroes of corn husking like the heroes today? Why or why not? What has changed during the years?

High School Questions

1. The Kewanee (Illinois) Historical Society has dedicated a part of their museum to the history and people of the corn husking contests. One can view the pegs and hooks, newspaper and magazine articles, and pictures. Do you think it is important to preserve history? Why or why not? What are some advantages for young people to learn about activities that took place in the past? What can we learn from our past generations?
2. Discuss and compare work ethics between people "then" and "now".
3. Was the family more important in the early 1900's than today? Why or why not? What has changed?
4. Would you consider corn husking a sport? Why or why not? Do you think it can be brought back today? Why or why not?
5. Do you think corn husking as a sport was important to agriculture in the 1900's? Why or why not? Has it helped the farmers today? Why or why not?
6. What can we learn by viewing this documentary and studying the guide? Is that important? Why or why not?

Lesson 2 — Mathematics

Acres, Pounds, and Bushels

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson students will be able to:

Elementary

Visualize the size of one acre as about the same size as an American football field

Understand how much corn production increased in the United States since 1920.

Middle/Junior High

Know how many years corn husking contests were held

Know how many farms are in the United States

Understand that corn is sold by weight that is determined by a known volume of the grain — corn is 56 lbs. per bushel

High School

Understand that corn is sold by weight that is determined by a known volume of the grain — corn is 56 lbs. per bushel.

Explain how and why grain test weight is used in the grain market — corn is sold at the standard moisture of 15.5 percent. When grain moisture is greater than this, the weight is deducted for the extra moisture.

Math Questions

1. The first national corn husking contest was held in 1927. They continued through 1941 when the United States entered World War II. During how many years were the contests held? _____

2. In 1975, the first National Contest since 1941 was held in Kansas. How many years are there between 1941 and 1975? _____
3. In 1940, the National Contest was held in Davenport, Iowa. The population of the town was 66,003. Approximately 125,000 spectators attended the event. How many more people watched the contest than lived in Davenport?

4. The hand-husking hook was invented 118 years ago. If this is the year 2010, in what year was the hook invented? _____
5. The number of farms in the United States declined from 6.5 million in 1920 to 2.2 million in 2007. How many fewer farms were there in 2007? _____
6. A bushel of corn weighs 56 pounds. In 1940, an Illinois contestant attained a record by picking 46 bushels of corn during an 80-minute contest. How much did his corn weigh? _____
7. In 1920, an acre of land produced about 60 bushels of corn. Today the average is about 250 bushels of corn per acre. How many more bushels of corn per acre is harvested today compared to 1920? _____
8. Dallas Paul claimed to have husked over 235 bushels of corn in 11 hours. How many bushels of corn per hour did he husk? _____
9. A farmer harvests 60 bushels of corn per acre. If the farmer has 80 acres, how many bushels of corn does he husk? _____
10. Henry Wallace, a former Secretary of Agriculture, was instrumental in starting the corn husking contests. He was born in 1888 and died in 1965. How old was Mr. Wallace when he died? _____

Lesson 3 — Science

The Corn Plant

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson students will be able to:

Know the parts of a corn plant
Know the parts of a kernel of corn

Elementary

Know and identify the parts of a corn plant

Middle/Junior High

Know and identify the parts of a corn plant
Understand, spell and correctly label the parts of a corn plant

High School

Know and identify the parts of a corn plant
Understand, spell and correctly label the parts of a corn plant
Draw and discuss the life cycle of a corn plant

Definition of Parts of the Corn Plant and the Kernel

1. Kernel — the seed of the plant and the part that you eat
2. Pericarp — the hard covering that protects the kernel
3. Tip cap — the part of the kernel that attaches to the ear or cob
4. Endosperm — the nutritive matter in the kernel
5. Germ — also called embryo — the end part of the kernel from which the corn plant develops when planted — it is the only living part of the kernel
6. Ear — holder of the kernels—sometimes called the cob or corncob

7. Husk — the dry external covering of the ear
8. Silk — the long soft threads at the top of the ear of corn
9. Root — the part of the plant that grows underground and carries food and water to the plant — there are two parts to the root: the crown roots that are beneath the soil and the prop roots and are above the ground
10. Stalk — the stem of the corn plant
11. Tassel — the flower at the top of the plant

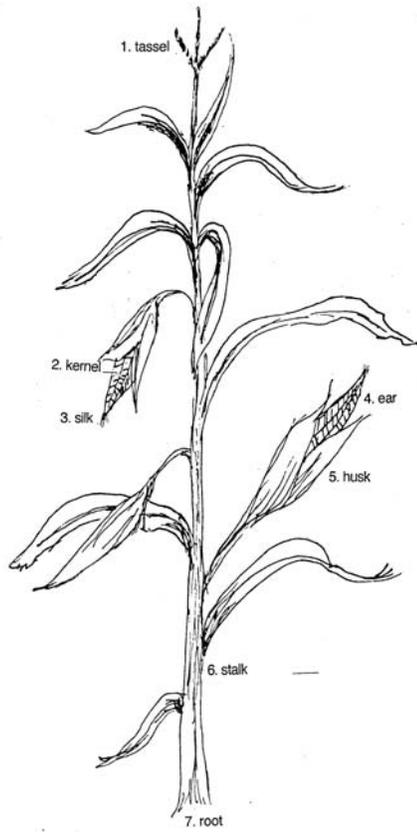
How the Corn Plant Grows

Develop a lesson on the life cycle of a corn plant. Explain that corn grows from a kernel or seed and has a root, stalk, husks, and a tassel. The kernel or seed becomes moist with water and breaks through the hard covering (pericarp) that protects the kernel. It then sprouts and begins to grow down into the soil as roots. The roots soak up water and minerals to support the plant and then the kernel pushes through the soil and forms a stalk that has leaves. At this time photosynthesis begins. In this process plants produce their own food from water, air, and sunlight. Now the plant matures and begins to produce ears. Pollen from the tassels on top falls on the silks and produces corn kernels. Pollination occurs when the falling pollen is transferred to the silk by birds or insects.

Have students draw and discuss the life cycle of the corn plant.

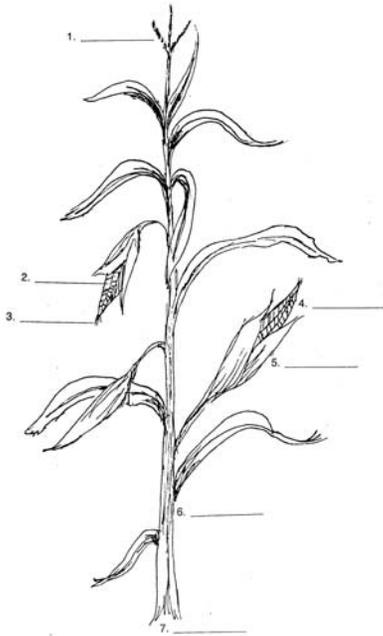
Label the parts of the corn plant

2



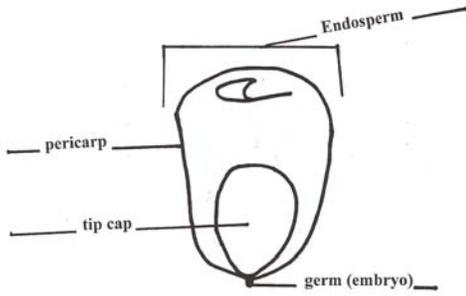
Answers

Label the parts of the corn plant

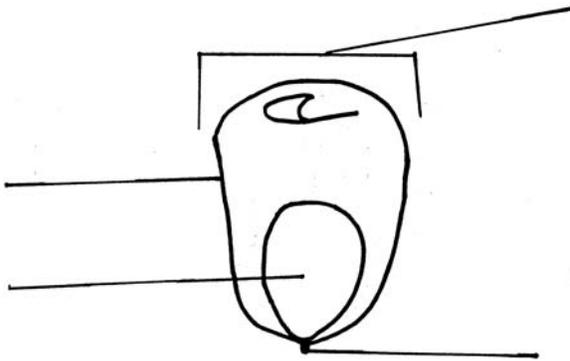


Parts of a Kernel

Answers



Label the Parts of the Kernel



Lesson 4 —Geography

Corn Country

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson students will be able to:

Identify states that held corn husking contests mentioned in the documentary

Understand the idea of a region, and describe the Corn Belt region and other regions

Know and identify the states that are part of the Corn Belt

Elementary

Name and locate on a map the nine states mentioned in the documentary (IL, IA, NE, KS, MN, MO, IN, OH, SD)

Middle/Junior High School

Understand what a region is and some characteristic of the Corn Belt Region—locate the corn belt on a map of the United States

High School

Distinguish between the core and periphery of regions, and identify them for the Corn Belt on a map of the United States

Discuss other regions within the United States

Regions

A region is an area that has certain characteristics which makes it different from surrounding areas. Within the United States a region can be as large as several states or can be smaller than a state. Examples of familiar regions include New England, the South, the Rocky Mountain region, the Great

Plains, and the desert southwest. Each of these areas has some distinctive characteristics and can be outlined on a map. Some of the characteristics are cultural, such as food preferences, religion, and traditions. Some are physical, such as climate and landforms.

The Corn Belt is an agricultural region. It is the part of the Midwest [which is also a region] where most of the corn is grown in the United States. In most of the Corn Belt, farmers also produce other crops, such as soybeans, and livestock, such as hogs.

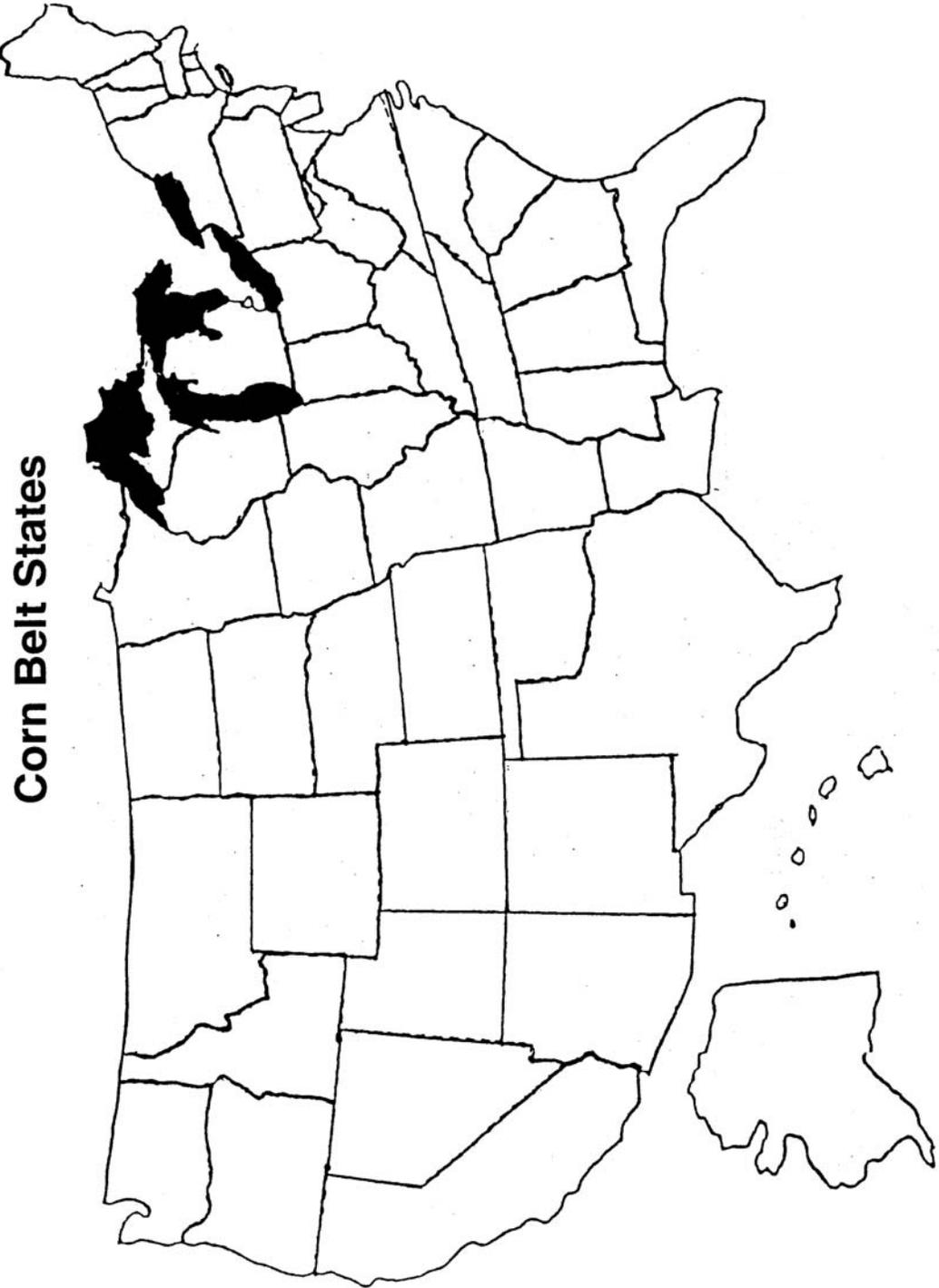
One reason for high corn production in the Corn Belt is its physical geography. The land is relatively flat, which allows for machinery such as tractors and combines to easily cover large fields. Tractors pull plows, planters, and cultivators, and combines harvest the corn. The area also has rich, fertile soils and a climate favorable to corn production. Adequate rainfall and hot summers help corn grow.

Sometimes a region can be divided into two parts: a *core* and a *periphery*. Most parts of Illinois and Iowa produce corn and together these two states have been the leaders in corn production for the last several decades. Therefore they can be called the core of the Corn Belt. The periphery includes large parts of neighboring states, plus Ohio, which are important producers too. They include: eastern Nebraska, eastern South Dakota, eastern Kansas, southern Minnesota, northern Missouri, northern Indiana, southern Michigan, and northern Kentucky.

Have the students identify on the United States map the states that are mentioned in the documentary and the states that are part of the core and the periphery of the Corn Belt.

Discuss with the students other major regions within the United States and their physical and/or cultural characteristics.

With your help, have the students identify, describe, and locate one or more specific regions within your own state.



Corn Belt States

Lesson 5 — Language Arts

Corn Husking and Agricultural Words

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson students will be able to:

Define and discuss words used in the video documentary and words related to agriculture

Discuss corn husking contests and agriculture in the United States using some of these words

Elementary

Understand, spell, and use the words in the lesson

Middle/Junior High

Understand, spell, and use the words in the lesson

Communicate by using content, process and context

High School

Communicate by using content, process and context

Demonstrate listening skills by paying attention to the details of a discussion

Utilize the contributions of others in discussions

Do you know the following words?

1. Agriculture — the science or art of cultivating land for the raising of crops or livestock.
2. Bang board — an extra board put on the side of the wagon away from the corn husker.
3. Bushel — a unit of weight used to measure the an amount corn — a bushel of corn kernels is eight gallons and weighs 70 pounds.
4. Cob — (sometimes called ear or corncob) the part of the corn plant that is protected by a husk of leaves.
5. Contest — competition between rivals, often for a prize.
6. Corn — an edible grain.
7. Crop farmer — a person who plants the seed, cares for the crop, harvests grain or other crops, and sells the product.
8. Drought — a period of dry weather with little or no rain.
9. Dust Bowl — the period of drought in 1930's when major dust storms took place in the Great Plains.
10. Fans — enthusiastic persons watching a sport — also persons or followers of a sport.
11. Great Depression — the economic crisis in the United States beginning when the stock-market crashed in 1929.
12. Heroes — persons displaying distinguished courage and great ability to excel in a certain feat.
13. Hook — a curved piece of metal used for pulling off husks on an ear of corn.
14. Husking — the act of removing the husks from an ear of corn.

15. Midwest — the north central region of the United States.
16. Mold — a growth of fungi that forms on the ear of corn that helps to make the corn decay.
17. National contest — a contest for a national championship.
18. Officials — persons who are selected or appointed to be in charge of an event.
19. Peg or hook — a small metal tool used by cornhuskers to help them strip the shucks or leaves from the ear of corn. The peg goes over the fingers and has a hook at the end.
20. Record — an act rated as the best and is recorded for history.
21. Roots — the part of a plant that goes deep into the soil and carries food and water to the plant.
22. Rot — decomposition or decay.
23. Slip hushing — the act of taking the husks or leaves from the ear of corn with bare hands.