

Grain

by Marilyn Reeves

On a warm spring day about 10,000 years ago, an ancient grandmother may have set her basket of woven grass down on a patch of soft earth near a stream that fed into the Tigris River. Adjusting her wolf skin cape, she might have bent down to sip the cold, clear water from the palm of her cupped hand. And perhaps she walked away from the stream leaving her basket behind, as it was nearly empty of the grain she and her daughters had gathered while their husbands and sons were off hunting for wild game.

And some weeks later she may have happened upon the forgotten basket and found shoots of that same grain growing up through the dried plates in the bottom of it, and thought to herself, in her crude, ancient language, "I wonder?"

And it could be that she took some more of the grains and deliberately scattered them about that soft, warm soil and waited awhile longer to see the results. And perhaps that first little patch of grain planted by human hand grew and flourished and that was the first day of civilization.

Some years later, another woman may have discovered that, by pounding the grain and mixing it with water and a bit of animal fat to make a simple dough, if she left it to bake on a hot rock by the fire, she could make bread. And one day, a thirsty young man may have found a clay pot that contained the remnants of dough, which had since been filled with rain water and left to ferment, and had the first taste of grog. And over the ensuing centuries the recipe was improved upon and grain alcohol became a staple of living, as did the whole-grain bread that filled the hungry bellies of our early ancestors.

The birth of agriculture was the dividing line between hunter-gatherers and modern civilization. No longer was it necessary for the people living in the temperate zones of the world to follow the wild animals and search for wild plants to eat, when there was a plentiful supply of crops at hand. Most important among those crops was grain, for it could be made into bread. And bread was to become the primary food source for a budding civilization.

Grains of corn, grains of malt;
grains of barley, wheat and rye.
A patchwork of grain blankets the land
as far as the eye can see.
With back-breaking toil
you till the soil, plant seeds of grain
and pray for rain.

Row upon row
You watch how they grow
Tender crops reaching toward the sun.
After the harvest and winter's refrain
the warm days of Spring will come again
And it will be time once more
to plant the grain.