

Conservation Corner

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Harvest is almost completed, time to turn our thoughts to the upcoming holiday season. We hope many of you are making plans to come to Pocahontas on Saturday, Nov. 24, to take part in their Annual Art Walk. Step back in time and spend a Saturday morning and/or afternoon walking up and down Main Street, visiting with friends and neighbors while enjoying and exploring the talent of local artists on display at participating offices and businesses.

We also invite everyone to step into the ISU Extension Office from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. to join PCCB for our annual Christmas Make & Take Workshop. This year we'll be trying our hand at wheat weaving, an ancient tradition that will also serve as this week's encounter with nature.

Throughout history, thriving civilizations have been closely tied to bountiful harvests, and cultures around the world include tales of harvest celebrations. During the Middle Ages in Europe, in order to capture the fertility of the earth, people would weave figurines and designs from the last or best sheaf of the grain harvest. Preserved over winter, the Spirit of the Grain would then be plowed back into the soil the following spring. By the late 1800s, harvest tokens were widespread throughout Europe. Immigrants carried their knowledge and skills of straw weaving to their new homes in America.

Of course, in addition to these symbols of harvest, many practical items were also created from grasses or cereal crops such as wheat, rye, oats, barley, and rice. Straw was used for sweeping floors, thatching roofs, or making ropes. Straw was also woven into baskets, skeps for beehives, and hats. Our family still wears straw hats while baling hay on a hot summer day.

Wheat weaving covers a wide variety of techniques. The most common method is plaiting or braiding in which hundreds of patterns are created from hollow or split stems of grass and straw. Other methods include straw marquetry, which is similar to wood marquetry and joins all the pieces together on a flat surface, as well as straw appliqués and mosaics. In Europe, straw embroidery dates from the 1600s and was especially used to decorate church vestments and costumes. Swiss straw work, dating from the 1800s, consists of fancy trimmings which were first used to decorate straw hats. Another method is tied straw work, which is used to create tomtens, goats, and other figures in Scandinavia as well as stars in Germany and Switzerland.

Many cultures still weave straw into their harvest and Christmas celebrations. In Spain children stuff shoes with hay and straw for the camels of the Three Kings, while in Poland straw is placed under the tablecloth in memory of the stable. In Norway, sheaves of wheat are tied on high poles for a special Christmas tree for the hungry birds. Perhaps you place some straw in your family's crèche or manger scene. This year, Conservation is including straw weaving in our holiday celebrations and programs. Won't you join us?

