

Artists on Tour

Barb & Russ Childers (“Bear Foot”)

Oh Shucks! Cornhusk Crafts, Songs & Staires



STUDY GUIDE

Written by Barb & Russ Childers

Edited & Designed by Kathleen Riemenschneider

ARTISTS' BIOS

RUSS CHILDERS has been making music since the Beatles came to town in the '60s. He started out with rock 'n roll but gravitated to old-time mountain music when he discovered his love for the music of his Eastern Kentucky ancestors. Now he shares his knowledge of Appalachian traditions through music, stories, and dance. Russ is active in the Ohio and Kentucky Arts Councils, as well as several Cincinnati arts and Appalachian organizations. **BARB CHILDERS** is a storyteller, dancer, musician, poet, singer, booklover, former children's librarian – and, since retiring, a quilter! Russ and Barb are members of the Rabbit Hash String Band and also perform together as Bear Foot.

BACKGROUND FOR PROGRAM

Explore southern Ohio corn from start to finish through stories, songs, and craft. Settlers coming to Ohio on flatboats moved up the smaller rivers to find rich farmable land. Corn was easy to grow but difficult to transport to market. Corn taken to a mill could be ground to meal, but that meant drying and stripping the cobs. Feeding corncobs to pigs and walking the pigs to market saved time and labor. The result? Pigs and pig products became an important industry in early Cincinnati, earning it the nickname "Porkopolis." Russ finds Native American, African American, Appalachian, and German influences in the region's music, songs, and stories, which also echo a more traditional lifestyle. Russ plays fiddle, banjo, and lap dulcimer to teach songs related to corn that would have been familiar to early communities in the region—"Boil The Cabbage Down" and turn the cornmeal hoecakes 'round, or hear about "Cotton Eyed Joe" who plays music on his cornstalk fiddle and bow. Some folks drank their corn; the song "Hot Corn, Cold Corn" tells one way to store it. Song titles come from real-life experiences: "Sheep Shell Corn" by trampling the corncobs into the ground and ruining the crop. Traditional stories by the artist tell how corn got its tassel, how the greedy pig got his short nose, or the summer when all the corn popped in the field. A hands-on craft demonstration allows children to learn firsthand about recycling on early farms as they fashion cornhusks into dolls and dudes.



HISTORY OF CORN

Corn, or maize, is common name for the cereal grass widely grown for food and livestock fodder. Corn ranks with wheat and rice as one of the world's chief grain crops, and it is the largest crop of the United States.

Corn is native to the Americas and was the staple grain of the region for many centuries before Europeans reached the New World. The origin of corn remains a mystery. Conclusive evidence exists, from archaeological and paleobotanical discoveries, that cultivated corn has existed in the southwestern United States for at least 3000 years. Wild corn was once thought to have existed in the Tehuacán Valley of southern Mexico 7000 years ago. More recent evidence puts the appearance of corn in that region at a much later date, about 4600 years ago. Early wild corn was not much different in fundamental botanical characteristics from the modern corn plant.

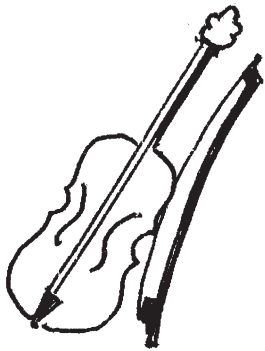
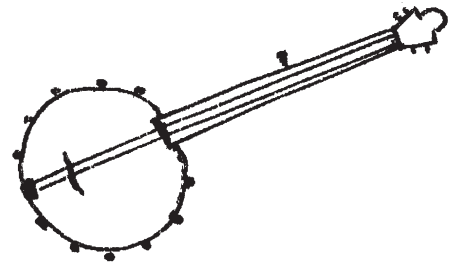


The many varieties of corn show widely differing characteristics. Some varieties mature in two months; others take as long as 11 months. The foliage varies in intensity of color from light to dark green, and it may be modified by brown, red, or purple pigments. Six general groups of varieties are differentiated by the characteristics of the kernel. Dent corn is the leading type of corn grown on U.S. farms. The sides of the kernel consist of hard, so-called horny starch, and the crown contains soft starch. As the grain matures, this soft starch shrinks, forming the characteristic dent. In flint corn, the horny starch extends over the top of the kernel, so that there is no denting. Popcorn is a light, highly popular snack throughout the United States, a variant of flint corn with small kernels of great hardness. When heated, the moisture in the kernels expands, causing the kernels to pop open. Flour corn contains a preponderance of soft or less densely packed starch, and it is readily ground into meal. Sweet corn is the type commonly grown in the United States for human consumption as a vegetable. The sugar produced by the sweet-corn plant is not converted to starch during growth, as it is in other types. The seeds are characteristically wrinkled when the plant is allowed to mature. Pod corn is seldom used as food but is often grown as a decorative plant; each kernel is enclosed in its own set of diminutive husks. Another decorative corn, commonly called Indian corn, consists of multicolored varieties of flour and flint types.

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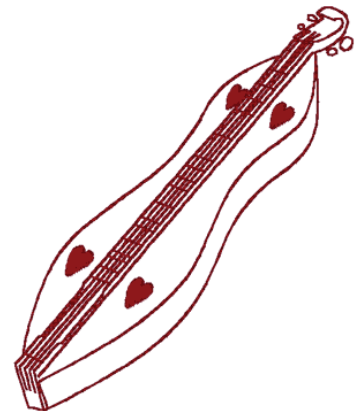
INSTRUMENTS

BANJO – stringed instrument of the lute family, with an open-backed round body consisting of a circular wood hoop over which is stretched a vellum belly. The only Western stringed instrument with a vellum belly, the banjo originated in Africa and was brought to America in the 17th century by black slaves. Early banjos had fretless necks, a varying number of strings, and, sometimes, gourd bodies. Adopted by white musicians in 19th century minstrel-show troupes, the banjo gained frets and metal strings. The five-string banjo, plucked with the fingers, is common in folk music and commercial bluegrass bands. The plectrum-plucked four-string banjo was popular about 1900 in vaudeville bands.



FIDDLE – any instrument from a widespread family of bowed lutes consisting of one or more strings stretched the full length of a fingerboard terminating in a soundbox. Fiddle is also the colloquial name given to instruments of the violin family. Most fiddles are flat-backed. The 13th century rebec, however, is tear-shaped and has a convex back like a lute. Many fiddles incorporate sympathetic strings that vibrate when the string next to them is sounded, enriching the overall effect. Medieval and Renaissance fiddles held at the shoulder are the immediate predecessors of the violin. In folk fiddle traditions, from the gypsy music of Eastern Europe to American country music, the violin was widely adopted as the successor to the fiddle.

DULCIMER – a simple wooden Appalachian musical instrument traditionally with 3-4 strings stretched across a long shallow tear-drop or hourglass-shaped hollow sound box. Often homemade and played by self-taught individuals, it is placed on the lap and played by sliding a noter up and down the fretboard with one hand while strumming across all the strings with a goose quill or pick with the other. The word “dulcimer” means “sweet sound”: “dulcis” the Latin word for sweet and “melos” the Greek word for sound. The mountain dulcimer – also called a “dulcymore” or “hog fiddle” – is one of America’s oldest folk instruments. An authentic creation unique to this nation, Kentucky recognizes it as the official folk instrument of the Commonwealth. Handmade dulcimers were peddled throughout the eastern Kentucky region during the late 19th century. Even earlier than that, settlers from southern England brought to this country an instrument they called a “dowcemerer.” Pennsylvania Germans in Virginia and West Virginia in the early 1700s played a schietholt, a square three-stringed member of the fretted zither family, which may also have inspired early dulcimer design.



Banjo and fiddle pictures courtesy of Uncle Mike Carr. Dulcimer Illustration Source: Windstar Embroidery Designs (<http://www.windstarembroidery.com/Details.cfm?ProdID=4544>)

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ACTIVITIES

- **Cornhusking bee.** Traditionally, the person who finds the red ear of corn buried in the pile of unhusked corn gets to kiss the person of his or her choice!
- **Corn maze.** Create one from cornstalks bundled together and laid on the ground in concentric pattern. Travel to Germantown, Ohio, to visit Tom's Corn Maze. (<http://www.tomsmaze.com>)
- **Cornhusk dolls and dudes.** Gather husks from a field or buy them ready-made at a store that sells them from tamales, e.g., Jungle Jim's in Fairfield, Ohio, (<http://www.junglejims.com/index.cfm>). Find directions for making cornhusk dolls in *The Foxfire Book of Toys and Games*, also in *Colonial Kids: An Activity Guide to Life in the New World* by Laurie Carlson.
- **Cornhusk fiddle and bow.** Contact a local farmer (or garden store) in late summer or early fall to harvest cornstalks. Sing about Cotton-Eyed Joe who "made a cornstalk fiddle and a cornstalk bow and if that ain't a-fiddling then I don't know!" Find directions for making a cornstalk fiddle and bow in *The Foxfire Book of Toys and Games* and also in *Homemade Instruments* by Dallas Cline.

Corn recipes from different cultures. Use corn ears, meal, kernels, and husks:

- » Roast whole ears of silver queen corn in the husk Ohio-style. Purchase fresh-picked ears of local corn. Soak the ears with the husk still on in a bucket of salted cold water for at least one hour. Do not remove the husks, but lay the ears of corn on a grill over the prepared coals of an outdoor charcoal grill, turning them occasionally for fifteen minutes or more until the husks dry and darken. Remove from heat. Peel the husks back; add butter, salt, and pepper to taste. Sing "Hot corn, cold corn, bring along a demijohn, fair thee well, Uncle Bill, see you in the morning, yes sir!"
- » Make Appalachian cornmeal cakes, sometimes called hoecakes. This name comes from when settlers fried the batter on a hoe blade over a fire out in the cornfield. *Mountain Makin's in the Smokies*, a cookbook published by The Great Smoky Mountains Natural History Association, 1957, gives this recipe: Mix together 2 cups of cornmeal with $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of salt. Scald with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup boiling water to make stiff dough. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ -1 tablespoon bacon drippings and another $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cold water. Shape into oval flat "pones" and bake on a hot well greased iron griddle. Turn once. Serve them with tasty boiled cabbage from German traditions. Sing, "Boil them cabbage down, boys, and turn the hoecakes round, the only song I ever did sing was Boil Them Cabbage Down!" Then put the hoe down and have an old-fashioned square dance – which was sometimes called a "hoedown"- get it?
- » Make parched corn from the Native American tradition. In *More Than Moonshine: Appalachian Recipes and Recollections* by Sidney Saylor Farr (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), the author says mountain hunters often carried a handful of parched corn in their pockets to ward off hunger on long trips. To make your own, first shell the kernels from a mature ear of dried corn and fry them in a cast iron skillet with a tablespoon of lard and a teaspoon of salt. Stir in the grains frequently until they are deep brown in color. Enjoy them hot or cold!
- » Make Mexican tamales steamed in the cornhusks themselves.

RESOURCES

Barbara McClintock: Alone in Her Field. Deborah Heiligman.

Cincinnati: An Urban History. Karen Regina.

Corn Belt Harvest. Raymond Bial.

Corn Is Maize: The Gift of the Indians. Alike.

Four Seasons of Corn: A Winnebago Tradition. Sally M. Hunter.

The Foxfire Book of Toys and Games. Linda Garland Page.

I Like Corn. Robin Pickering.

Jamie's Turn. Jamie DeWitt.

Legend of Food Mountain. Harriet Rohmer.

Popcorn. Alex Moran.

The Popcorn Book. Tomie DePaola.

The Story of the Milky Way: A Cherokee Tale. Joseph Bruchac.

Three Stalks of Corn. Leo Politi.

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Music: A Pictorial Archive of Woodcuts & Engravings. Jim Harter.

CORN-RELATED WEBSITE TO EXPLORE

Explore the corn links on 42eXplore on the EduScapes web site.

<http://www.42explore.com/corn.htm>