

The patina of the past *is still here*



Water is essential to life and growing crops. Birds perch on a center pivot rolling irrigation system.

Story and photos by Tom Chillemi

Not so very long ago, people worked from sunup to sundown just to grow enough food for the family.

Today, food comes from a grocery store — and it's plentiful. But that's only the final step. It still takes a lot of planning, work and good weather to raise food.

Civilization began when mankind established agriculture. People no longer had to follow herds of game animals, or search all day for roots, berries or grains. They domesticated grazing animals that harvested grass, turning it into protein. Meat was stored on the hoof until it was needed.

Growing crops may have been an accidental discovery when dropped seed sprouted.

For centuries horses were depended on for farming. Machinery that could be stored for months without a thought replaced horses that required daily attention. The horse became a luxury.





Time has taken away the red paint and added a weathered gray patina. Openings were cut in barn doors to allow cats inside to control rodents.

A crosscut saw rests where it was hung decades ago, replaced by a chainsaw.



Harvesting from nature

Grasses have been among the most important plants in mankind's past. Some species were selected for cultivating. Wheat, rye, barley, oats, corn and the rest became staples, not only for food, but alcohol to drink, and one day, to fuel engines.

Humans learned to preserve food, not just for themselves, but for the animals they depended on for survival. Tall grass was cut and piled in a cone-shaped haystack that would shed water. "Making hay while the sun shines," was hard work. The alternatives were worse.

Later, hay bales for winter were stacked in barn haylofts. Now, grass is rolled into round bales stored outside under plastic. Grass is a simple but diverse plant.

The vault

Old wooden barns, having served their time, are teetering on the edge of history. Few remain, their gray wood wears the patina of time.

Big old barns speak of a time when they sheltered



Goat status is determined through sport—bitting, that was a protective tactic in the wild.

beasts of burden — muscle power to plow and move things — and the fuel that fed them.

Barns are a reminder of our roots. Construction of these large buildings was a huge undertaking that took a lot of resources. But to a farmer, barns were as essential as a house.

Thanks to science and technology, many people no longer worry about having enough to eat.

There is a paradox that the struggle to survive has evolved into a surplus of food so large that edible plants are made into engine fuel — ethanol to power us on our search for what is missing, what we want, or need. For our ancestors what they needed was on their farm.

Now, we “hunt and gather” things we need from others, in a way that’s not unlike our pre-farming ancestors. Trade is the basis of a good economy.

Our roots are in the past — when work had a much deeper meaning. Remnants of that time survive. They are still here, for now.



Sunlight pierces through holes drilled by carpenter bees and project large round dots on the barn’s opposite wall.



A 2013 Final Jeopardy answer read: "Economically speaking, this plant family with about 10,000 species is by far the most important." The correct answer is "What are grasses?" Among them are wheat, seen above maturing as a June storm approaches.



Grains need to be ground into flour or animal feed. Poplar Grove tide mill on Mathews' East River is the only surviving tide mill in Virginia, according to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. The present mill replaced a colonial tide mill, burned during the Civil War. This mill harnessed the power of the tide until 1912.