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CORN-SHUCK DOLLS

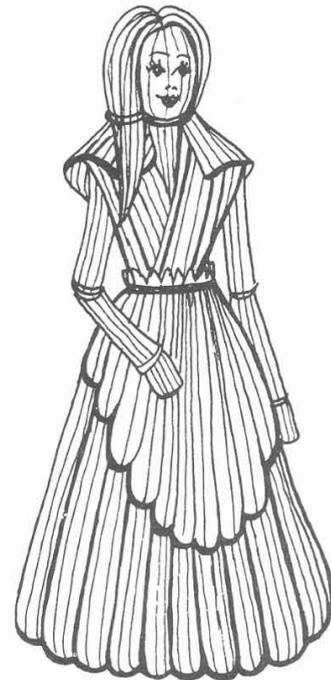
By Pat Cunningham

Although corn, or maize as it was known to the Indians, is now grown throughout the civilized world, it originally was harvested only in America. When the Europeans arrived here in the 1600's, Indians in North, Central, and South America were using corn as a staple in their diets.

Corn is often declared to be the vegetable responsible for the survival of the early colonists. It was preserved, steamed, dried, pickled, ground, and sometimes turned into liquid form as syrup, whiskey, or cooking oil. It fed the livestock as well as the colonists, and the shucks and cobs were also used in many ingenious ways.

They wove corn-shucks into rugs, doormats, baskets, seats for stools, for decorations, brooms, brushes, whips, bridles, horse collars, toy muskets and hobby horses for children. Many mattresses were stuffed with dried corn-shucks. Dry corn-cobs were used for kindling, to make delightful carved toys, and hallowed out cobs became pipes for smoking Indian tobacco.

One of the oldest known American hand-crafted toys is a little doll made of corn-shucks. Throughout the Americas, Indian and pioneer children played with corn-shuck dolls. Today, similar dolls are mostly seen at craft shows or country stores in the Appalachians or the Ozarks. However, they are not confined to these areas. The corn-shuck dolls are still made throughout the United States, Canada, Central and South America. Those of Latin or Indian origin reflect the culture of their respective countries, while those found in the United States recall the traditional crafting style of the early pioneers. These little corn-shuck people are replicas of colonial ladies in bonnets, soldiers with muskets, farmers, brides, blacksmiths, and babies.



Carla Stiles

Directions For Making Corn-Shuck Dolls

Materials needed for one doll

- inner shucks from six or seven ears of corn
- corn-silk for hair
- needlenose pliers and one piece of eighteen gauge wire
- scissors, glue, black and red felt-tip pens, heavy duty thread, a plastic bag large enough to hold all the shucks, plenty of old newspapers to work on, and paper towels or one of terry cloth

Preparation of material

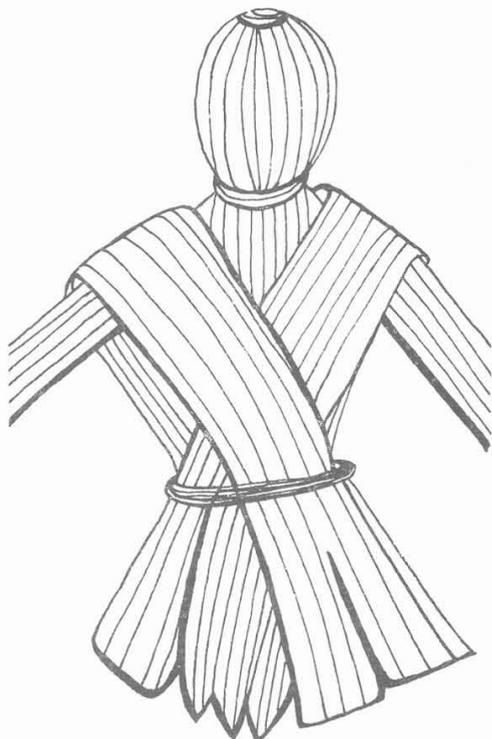
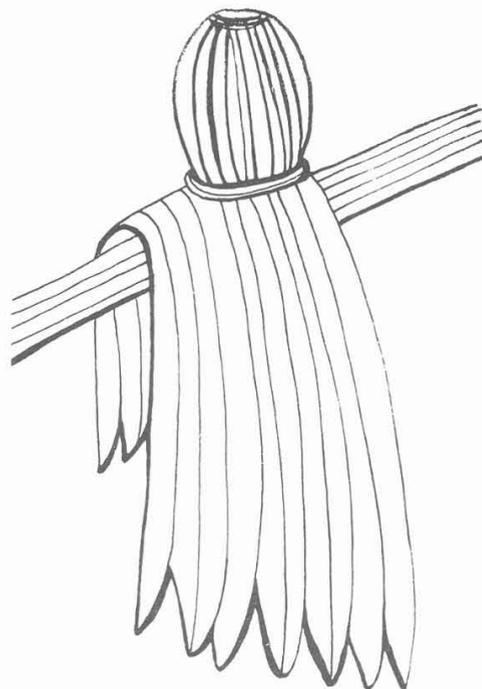
- Separate inner shucks and trim off one inch from top and bottom. Spread them on newspaper to dry for one week. Shucks are ready for use when they are a light tan color.
- Lightly sprinkle dry shucks with water and seal in the plastic bag overnight. This allows the moisture to be evenly distributed. Shucks should be barely damp, not wet. If too much moisture remains, dry them by pressing them against paper towels or terry towel.
- When ready to start, tear one or two shucks into quarter inch strips to make ties. Cut six or seven pieces of heavy duty thread in one foot lengths.

Making Doll Head

Hold five or six shucks together and tie center of shucks with heavy duty thread. Then carefully peel back shucks from one end (as if peeling a banana) as far back as possible. Tie off for head about one inch from top. Now make another bundle of shucks and tie off in the center again. Place bottom part of bundle over the existing head. Tie it off in the same place as doll neck. Now peel the second top section back in same manner as first bundle and tie it off at neckline. This makes a larger and firmer head. Cover thread with a shuck tie, knot shuck tie at back, and tuck ends into body of doll.

Making arms and shoulders

Thread a length of eighteen gauge wire through a corn-shuck and roll four or five more shucks around it. Tie at wrists and at the center with heavy duty thread. Insert arms through upper body of doll. Arms will stick straight out at sides. With heavy duty thread, tie arms with a "X" tie over and around shoulders and body. Cover with corn-shuck and tie in back; again, tuck in the ends. Be sure you have selected best side of head for a face before tying off arms.



Making shoulder of dress

Make shoulder of dress by placing wide shucks on each shoulder and crisscrossing them at the waistline. Tie off with thread.

Making skirt

Place shucks in layers around the body till you have full skirt (use stem ends at bottom of skirt). Tie off at waistline. Trim those shuck ends above tie off at waist. Now use wide shuck to cover waist as a girdle. Hold it in place and tie off with narrow shuck tie. Knot it in back and wind ends around tie.

Finishing doll

Doll is dried by winding a string around the waist and tying it to a coat hanger to dry for several days. At end of drying time, doll can be trimmed at bottom and it will stand alone.

Variations on finish

Corn silk hair can be added or a corn-shuck bonnet or both. The face is made with felt tip pen. Accessories such as pocket-books, baskets, aprons, etc., can also be made and added before drying.