

## **The History of Scarecrows.....**

Hungry birds have always been a problem for farmers. Sometimes the birds ate so much corn or wheat that a farmer and his family would not have enough food to last through the winter. So, for more than 3,000 years, farmers have been making scarecrows.

### **Egyptian Scarecrows**

The first scarecrows in recorded history were made along the Nile River to protect wheat fields from flocks of quail. Egyptian farmers put wooden frames in their fields and covered them with nets. The farmers hid in the fields and scared the quail into the nets. Then they took them home and ate them for dinner!



### **Greek Scarecrows**

Twenty-five hundred years ago Greek farmers carved wooden scarecrows to look like Priapus, the son of the god Dionysus and the goddess Aphrodite. Priapus lived with some vineyard keepers and it is said that he was very ugly. The vineyard keepers noticed that when Priapus played in the vineyards the birds stayed away from the grapes and the harvest was the best ever. Other farmers decided to make statues that looked like Priapus to use in their vineyards. They painted the figures purple and put a club in one hand to make the statue look more dangerous and a sickle in the other for a good harvest.

### **Roman Scarecrows**

The Romans copied the Greek custom and made carved scarecrows too. When Roman armies went to places like France, Germany, and England they introduced the people who lived there to Priapus scarecrows.

### **Japanese Scarecrows**

Japanese farmers also began making scarecrows to protect their rice fields about the same time the Greeks and Romans made their wooden statues. At first the Japanese farmers hung old rags, meat, or fish bones from bamboo poles in their fields. Then they set the sticks on fire and the smell was so bad that birds and other animals stayed away from the rice. The Japanese farmers called their scarecrows kakashis which means something that smells badly. Soon Japanese farmers also made scarecrows that looked like people. They were dressed in a raincoat made of reeds and a round straw hat that rose to a peak in the middle. Bows and arrows were often added to make them look more threatening. These scarecrows were also called kakashis even if they didn't stink!

### **The Middle Ages**

During the Middle Ages in Europe, farmers made scarecrows which they believed had special powers. In Italy skulls of animals were placed on the tops of tall poles in the fields. Farmers believed the skulls would scare away birds and protect crops from diseases. In Germany farmers made wooden witches and put them in their fields at the end of winter. They believed that witches would draw the evil spirit of winter into their bodies so spring could come.

### **Medieval Britain**

In Medieval Britain scarecrows were live boys who were 9 years old or older. Known as bird scarers or bird shoosers, they patrolled wheat fields carrying bags of stones. If crows or starlings landed in the fields they would chase them off by waving their arms and throwing the stones.

The Great Plague killed almost half the people in Britain in 1348, so landowners couldn't find enough bird scarers to protect their crops. They stuffed sacks with straw, carved faces in turnips or gourds, and made scarecrows that stood against poles.

The boys and sometimes girls who survived the plague and still worked as bird scarers had to patrol 2 or 3 acres by themselves. So, instead of bags of stone, the children carried clappers made of 2 or 3 pieces of wood joined together at one end. The noise made by the clappers scared off whole flocks of birds. Bird scarers continued to patrol British fields until the early 1800s when new factories and mines opened up and offered children better paying jobs.

### **North America**

To protect their corn crops Native American tribes throughout North America used scarecrows or bird scarers. Most Indian bird scarers were adult men. Some, in what is now Virginia and North Carolina, sat on raised wooden platforms and howled and shouted if crows or woodchucks came near the corn. In Georgia, Creek Indian families moved into huts in their corn fields during the growing season to protect the crop from birds and other animals. Seneca Indians, in what is now New York, soaked corn seeds in a poisonous herb mixture that would make the crows fly crazily around the fields and scare away the other birds.

In the American Southwest, Zuni children in the late 1800s had contests to see who could make the most unusual scarecrow. The Zunis also used yucca lines to protect their corn fields from pests. They placed cedar poles about 6 to 9 feet apart all over the cornfield. Cords made from the fiber of the yucca plants were strung from pole to pole like clotheslines. Rags, pieces of dog and coyote skins, and the shoulder blades of animals were hung from the lines. The waving rags and clacking blades kept most birds away. The Navajos also made scarecrows and used bird scarers. One Navajo scarecrow in the 1930s was reported to be a teddy bear fastened to the top of a pole and was said to work very well.



### **The Colonies and the United States**

When Europeans began to settle in North America in the 1600s they stood guard in their fields to protect the crops they needed for survival. In Plymouth, Massachusetts, all members of Pilgrim families all took turns being bird scarers. They not only had to scare away crows but wolves as well. The wolves were always trying to dig up the fish the Pilgrims buried with their corn seeds to help the seeds grow.

By the 1700s, the growing American colonies needed more and more grain and farmers decided that neither farmers nor bird scarers were protecting the crops well enough. So towns all along the Atlantic coast offered bounties for dead crows. So many crows were killed that in the 1800s a new problem arose. Corn borers and other worms and insects which were once eaten by the crows were now destroying more corn and wheat than the crows had. Towns stopped offering bounties and farmers went back to making scarecrows.

Immigrants who moved to the United States during the 1800s brought with them a variety of ideas for making scarecrows. In Pennsylvania, German farmers built human looking scarecrows called a bootzamon or bogeyman. His body was a wooden cross and his head was a broom or mop top or a cloth bundle stuffed with straw. The bootzamon wore old overalls, a long-sleeved shirt or coat, a worn woolen or straw hat, and a large red handkerchief around his neck. Sometimes a second scarecrow was built to keep the bootzamon company. A bootzafrau or bogeywife, dressed in a long dress or coat and wearing a sunbonnet on her head, was placed on the opposite end of the field. The bootzamon and bootzafrau guarded cornfields, strawberry patches, and cherry orchards.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s scarecrows became very popular and could be found all across America. Then after World War II farming became a big business and farmers decided scarecrows didn't work. So they started spraying or dusting their crops with poisonous chemicals like DDT until in the 1960s scientists discovered that these chemicals might hurt people who ate the sprayed crops.

Then some farmers built contraptions like whirligigs that spun in the air like windmills to scare away the birds. A British company invented an automatic crop protector which was a metal box with 3 arms that was placed on top of a pole. The box contained caps that exploded every 45 minutes and made the 3 metal arms flap up and down. Unfortunately, the noise and clashing metal arms scared away the neighbors as well as the birds!

### **Scarecrows Today**

Farmers still use scarecrows all over the world. In countries like India and some Arab nations, old men sit in chairs and throw stones at the birds who try to eat their crops just like the bird scarers of long ago. During the growing season scarecrows still stand in fields around the world and each fall many communities have scarecrow contests like the Zuni children did. As long as birds are hungry farmers will look for ways to **SCARE CROWS!**

