

# PART OF THE PAST HARRISBURG AREA MUSEUM

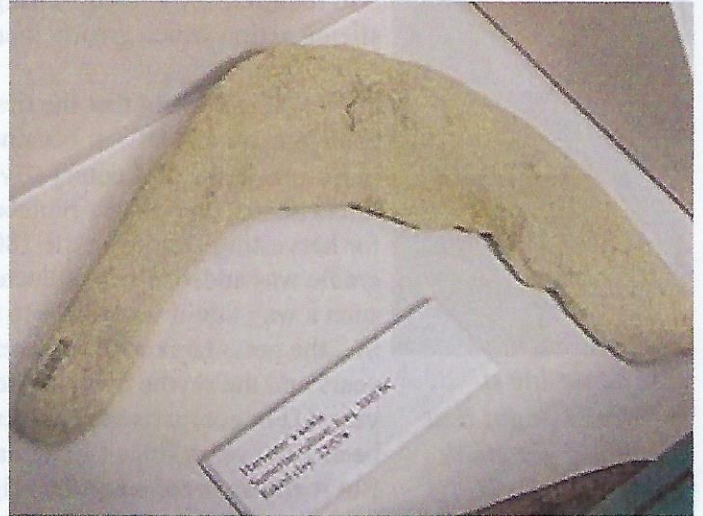
Charlie Kizer, editor

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## REAPERS AND REAPING

The grass hook is about the earliest implement used by man to harvest food. Early examples date from, according to some experts, some 10,000 years ago. I don't know about that, but it is clear that first models were a LONG time ago!

This (right) example of a bone sickle was found in Mesopotamia and dates from about 3000 BC. It is serrated which is not unusual. Even earlier models were

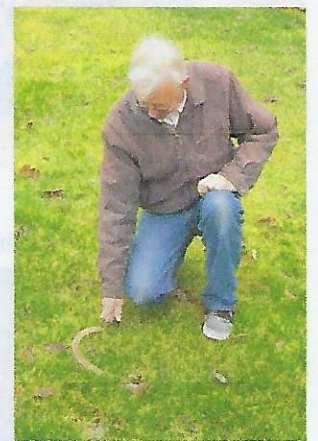


of flint or similar stone and were more of a saw than a knife. The ancient Greek iron sickle shown at the left now rests in a museum in Athens. Since it is iron it is of later vintage. The cutting edge was often serrated by notching with a chisel. Bronze was also used but was too soft to hold an edge for long. But maybe better than stone! Such grass hooks were essential to the Agricultural Revolution that resulted from man realizing that it would be good to harvest grain etc for storage and future use. It greatly increased the daily production of the work force. This allowed the timely harvesting of grain at one elevation, finishing in time to harvest grain at a higher elevation. This effectively extended the growing season. And accommodated a considerable increase in harvest tonnage.

A Wikipedia Writer says, "A significant portion of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Earth's dwellers would perish if millions of sickles were still not swung each season in an effort to procure "the daily bread". Wikipedia is not always true...I am a bit skeptical! But there was a time when it was a vitally important tool.

The Museum does not have any examples of such ancient tools. But we do have a more modern exhibit. The grass hook is used in several ways depending on what is being cut. A common method is for the user to grasp a handful of stalks with his left hand, then encircle the stalks below his hand with the grass hook, pulling the hook towards himself to shear off the stems. I still have a scar from a time long ago when I failed to encircle BELOW my hand! Sometimes the grass hook is simply swung quickly and the stalks are knifed off near the ground. But probably you have all used such a tool...

I find the sequence interesting. Note that the first thing to happen is the radical idea that tools are helpful. Image the first guy, who has never even considered that something could help him harvest his rice, suddenly conceived that a sharp rock could help him. Big innovation. Then it is many generations, maybe 100, where the basic tool is simply modified. Better shapes, better material. But still a simple hand tool to cut grass. Then, a major innovation: The Scythe. Let's talk about that for a bit....



*Lee Heckart, Board Chairman, serving as a docent*

The Scythe blade is longer...about 36 inches...and is only slightly curved instead of hook shaped. The handle is designed for two hands and is some 4-5 feet long. Sometimes curved a bit to make it more ergonomic. I remember grandad scything down the native grass that grew up between his house and mine. About a 50' by 150' plot. It had several apple trees growing there and the horse drawn mower was not practical. Grandad left a smooth, short stubble and the cut stems in a swathe which we (mostly "I"! ) would gather up and place under the apple trees to catch the ripe apples as they fell. I tried the scythe...I was about 10 at the time...with mixed results. I was too small and it required strength and coordination that I lacked. It also required a rhythm of 'swing-step-swing' that needs practice. But I appreciated the slicing action which greatly increased production and reduced labor per acre.



*Lee demo'ing a Scythe.. I doubt that he would get much cut!*

It is thought that the first scythe was made around 500 BC. It became quite common in Europe in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. By the 16<sup>th</sup> Century it had almost completely replaced the grass hook for harvesting grains. In the 1800's the grain cradle was added which collected the straw in such a way that it was easier to tie into a bundle. So...the grass hook evolved over maybe 8000 years and the scythe over an additional 1800 years! (For comparison consider that it has only been 2000 years since Christ walked the earth!) But it all has been, since the original idea of using a tool, essentially an evolution, not a



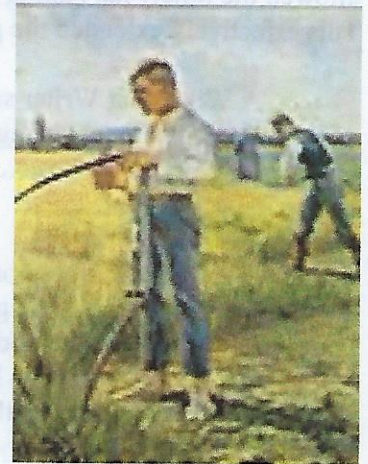
*Our collection. Note the scythe with a cradle center top*

creative change to a new method of harvest. The grain was still cut by hand and moved from the field for further processing or storage. (Most of the dating comes from Wikipedia...draw your own conclusions as to accuracy...)

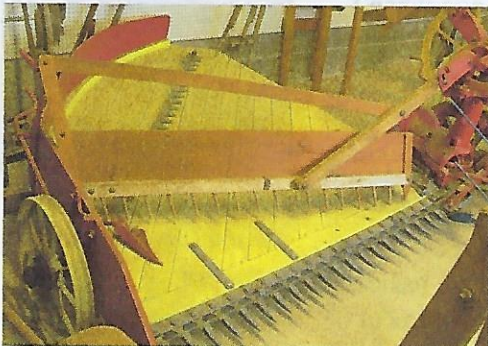


The scythe has been used as a weapon in battle. The blades are sharpened 'razor sharp' and would be a formidable weapon against other hand weapons. But, as the saying goes..."You don't want to bring a knife to a gun fight".

The scythe is also often used in representations of 'The Grim Reaper'. I don't know whether this was because the scythe was a deadly weapon or perhaps as a symbol that things were at an 'end'... harvest, the conclusion of the growing season, was here. The scythe is also found in art. At right a painting, "Mower Men" by Pekka Halonen (Whoever that is!) About 1891. At left a German peasant shown about 850 AD. I'm not sure what he is doing...but I wouldn't want to get in his way!



Next issue...Something new: A "Mechanical Reaper".



*1870 McCormack Reaper*

## HARRISBURG AREA MUSEUM

490 Smith Street....regular open: Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday.  
Winter: December/January: Saturday Only...Hours are 10:00AM to 4:00PM. Other days/times may be arranged with special appointment. Call Lee Heckart 541-995-8174 or the Museum at 541-995-4844

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