

The Perennial Agriculture Vision

I stood on a ridge in southwest Wisconsin looking into the sharp, dry winds and watched the clouds of dust rise up in the afternoon heat above a small metallic swarm of combine harvesters. As far as the eye could see the landscape was the same — parched, compacted soil, lifeless as pavement with row upon endless row of corn stubble. To the horizon in the west, to the north, and to the east, nothing could be seen but barren, dusty, corn stubble. Aside from the combines, the scene was as lifeless as the moon. In fact it could have been on the moon with the same driver of the spacecraft safely ensconced in a climate-controlled life support machine, complete with GPS satellite guidance system and cell phone communication. The only birds I saw in this barren, dusty “moonscape” were turkey vultures circling high overhead, possibly hoping that the combine had spit out a crushed rat, one of the few creatures able to thrive in a desert of corn.

Here I was standing in the midwestern United States, the self-proclaimed breadbasket of the world, and what did I see? Instead of a landscape teeming with life and overflowing with bounty, I saw dust and stubble. Here where there once was life in abundance, springs gushing out from every hillside, passenger pigeons in flocks so large they blotted out the sun, beaver so thick in every stream that the valleys were a crazy-quilt of their handiwork, there was now only #2 yellow dent corn, bristly tan corn stubble, and the hard packed crust of what was once some of the most fertile soil on earth.

As a child I had been taught that the story of America was the story of progress. Once upon a time our ancestors came to this land and wrestled an existence from the cruel taskmaster called the “wilderness.” They lived lives of squalor and sacrificed much in their lives so that we might live “better” than they did and so that we might enjoy more material things. My European
