A Word About Grist Mills

Grist is any grain that has been separated from its chaff to prepare it for grinding. The word also can refer to the grain that has been ground at a grist mill.

A *grist mill* is the building where grain is ground, and in many countries, these buildings are called corn or flour mills. The grinding mechanism itself also can be called a grist mill.

Round mill stones grind the grain into meal or flour, depending on how coarse or fine it is ground. When corn is coarsely ground, the grist is called grits. When corn is finely ground, it is called corn meal.

The power to move mill stones can come from water, wind, electricity, or fossil fuels. If water power is used, a fast-moving channel of water, called the mill race, brings the water to the mill. The energy from the water turns a water wheel on the outside of the mill, and the wheel turns the mill stones. Some of the earliest water-powered mills were built in Europe and the Middle East about 2000 years ago.

Grist Mill in Rockcastle County, Kentucky.

In the Red River Gorge, James Drake built a grist mill on Swift Creek about 150 years ago. To operate his mill, he built a dam to harness the energy of a nearby waterfall.

Corn can be ground with a hand grist mill, too. Hand mills, such as the stone mill shown here, are small and portable and can be used at home. This way, people of the historic past didn't have to travel to the grist mill.

Native farming peoples who lived in the Red River Gorge 1000 years ago did not have mills. They ground grains, like corn, by hand. They likely used a mortar and pestle to do this made from either wood or stone.

For the former, a partially hollowed-out log, about 3 feet in length, would have served as the mortar. It would have sat on end, with the hollowed out area at the top, and that's where the corn was ground. They would have pounded the corn with the pestle to grind it. A pestle was a thick, straight branch, about 4 or 5 feet long, that had been smoothed down to a bare surface. The bottom or working end of the pestle, which could have measured about 3 inches thick, was the grinding surface. The other end, about 5 inches thick, acted as a weight and was helpful in reducing the corn kernels to corn meal.