



Muriel Montgomery, a master wheat weaver formerly of Greeley, has created detailed figures such as this tractor and many other decorative pieces using wheat combined with dried flowers. Photo by Bea Roeder (Colorado Historical Society: MSS2450).

## Wheat Weaving

**Description:** Students learn the history of wheat weaving, engage in classroom discussions, and make examples in the classroom (3 different grade levels).

**Grades:** K-12

**Author:** Angelique Acevedo

**Materials Included:** Historical Background. Step by step instructions for wheat weaving projects.

**Materials Needed:** Straw, waxed string, cardboard or styrofoam, tap water  
Access to [www.wheatweaving.com](http://www.wheatweaving.com)

**Standards:** This activity can be used to address these Colorado Model  
**Content Standards:**

**Math:** 1

**Reading and Writing:** 4

**Science:** 5

**Visual Arts:** 4

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Activities 1, 2 and 3 are free projects from the Wheatweaving Company and are accessible at [www.wheatweaving.com](http://www.wheatweaving.com).

### Background Information Essay

Wheat weaving has been traced back to ancient times and has always been associated with the joyful festivals that occurred at harvest time. No exact date or place of origin can be found for this art form but it is believed that people in the Nile Valley of Egypt, where wheat was cultivated, used wheat to weave straw figures. Over 3000 years ago, in the Nile Valley, wheat grains were gathered, the seed was used for food and the straw for fiber. Even early cave drawings show the use of gathered fibers in simple totems. Wheat weaving is definitely a very ancient craft.

Early agriculture was not an exact process. Everything depended on the favorable conditions of weather and soil. Communities based on farming depended on an ample harvest to sustain themselves throughout the year. They also saw the relationship of the cycles of planting and harvesting to their own human process of birth and death. From these relationships sprang myths and customs related to the "blessings of the grain" and the "death and resurrection of the grain spirit."

Originally, wheat was woven into harvest symbols that had religious significance. Farmers gathered the choicest grains and fashioned them into weavings symbolizing their thanks to God for a successful harvest. These were then used to decorate their homes. Frequently, these weavings became the "home" for the spirit of the grain that was then kept safe until spring. At planting time, the grain was then returned to the field to ensure, or symbolize their hope for, another good harvest. The British lump all of these grains into the generic term "corn." Making grains into doll shapes for the harvest festivals led to naming straw objects as "corn dollies." Whatever the name, weaving the last sheaf of grain into a symbol was believed to capture the fertility of the fields. Because many of

the early weavings were fashioned into human-like figures, representing the grain spirit or Mother Nature, they were called "corn dollies."

Wheat weaving all but died out with the invention of the threshing machine, which broke the stems. Fortunately, a revival of interest in the art occurred in England in 1951 and in 1974 was popularized in Kansas by the Bethel College Women's Association during the centennial celebration of the Mennonites migrating from Russia and bringing their "red turkey" wheat to Kansas.



Muriel Montgomery created this decorative piece using wheat combined with dried flowers. Photo by Bea Roeder (Colorado Historical Society: MSS2450).

### Activity 1 - Braided Heart or Mordiford: Grades K-4

Objects made from dried straw are known to have been made in the earliest civilizations, and throughout Europe, Asia, and South America. Harvest rituals occurred in every country where grain was grown in order to please the spirits of the crop. Abstract shapes or religious symbols made from straw were believed to ensure prosperity and good luck in the next growing season. Objects made with the heads of grain still on the stem were hung on inside walls where they safely made it through the winter. These sacred grains were then planted the next season to assure the fertility of the entire crop. The main straw sources are wheat, oats, rye and barley.

Different regions of the world observed their own rituals and harvest festivals, each developing unique "dollies," such as the Arabic "cage or fringe" of Northern Africa, or the spiral "Greek lantern." Of long tradition is the heart-shaped "mordiford" from Mordiford, England and the "corazón de trigo" from Mexico, which originated in Spain and which is now commonly called the "house blessing."

Wheat is still the straw of choice for most projects because of inherent problems with the other grains. Other excellent grains for weaving include Kansas wheat, black-bearded Durum, barley, Cleopatra wheat, and Mid-East Black wheat. Rye is long and thinly tapered, and very stiff to work with; oats are smooth and waxy, making it very difficult to hold a shape, and barley is too short and brittle for most projects.

In England, the procedure is still often called "corn dolly plaiting." Since the craft caught on in the United States in the late 1970s, and the straw of choice was wheat, the term "wheat weaving" was coined and is becoming the recognized name of this folk art form.

(see <http://www.wheatweaving.com> for illustrations)

1. After reviewing the illustrations of the braided heart design, the classes discuss the significance of the "grain spirit" and the customs of the "blessing of the grain" (RW4).
2. Discuss Ancient Egyptians' use of grains: for food, fiber, and decorative crafts (VA4).
3. Wheat shafts are examined carefully and the grain quantities on various stalks are counted and compared (M1).
4. The students examine pictures of the wheat harvesting threshing machine. A discussion of other harvesting and farming equipment and their use is then triggered (S5).
5. The class then enjoys several images of wheat fields in Kansas and in paintings by Van Gogh. Their yellow color is of particular interest to the class and inspires a series of poems about yellow and amber waves of grain, like in the National anthem (RW4, VA4).
6. A materials list is organized and each student collects all the necessary supplies (M1, RW4, S5).

#### Supply List (Braided Heart)

- Ten (10) matched stalks of straws with seed heads attached
- Three (3) matched straws with or without heads (to make a braided top loop hanger)
- Waxed string for making the ties (dental floss works very well for this)

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- One (1) 12" by 12" piece of cardboard or Styrofoam for a "pinning board" for shaping and drying the project

**Preparation (Braided Heart)**

Next, prepare the wheat so that the weaving and plaiting can be easily accomplished. (M1, RW4, S5)

- Select 13 similar straws (diameter and seed head appearance).
- Trim straws just above the first joint (node) and slip off the leaves.
- Soak these straw shafts in hot tap water for about an hour until they feel "bouncy and flexible."
- You need to weigh them down when you soak them in order to keep them from floating and not getting properly soaked.
- If straws crack when you try to bend it, then you need to let them soak longer.
- The way to test and see if the wheat shafts are ready is to bend them. If they crack they are still too dry.

**Steps (Braided Heart)**

(see <http://www.wheatweaving.com> for illustrations.)

1. Tie together 10 straw shafts at about one-quarter inch below the heads.
2. Separate the shafts so that you have 3 straw shafts on the left, 3 on the right and 4 in the middle.
3. Next, tie the 4 straw shafts in the center at a point 3" from the first tie (away from the heads).

4. Braid (just like braiding hair) each set of 3 straw shafts for at least 6" and tie them off at the ends (make both the same length).

5. Form a heart by bringing the ends of the two braids to the 4" center straw shafts at the tie made in step #3.

6. Make sure there are no twists in the braids

7. Using 3 more straws with or without heads make another 6" braid and form a loop with the braid you just made and tie it at the step #3 tie location.

8. Wet the figure and pin it to the piece of cardboard so it can dry into final shape.



Muriel Montgomery's imaginative wheat weaving. Photo by Bea Roeder (Colorado Historical Society: MSS2450).

### Activity 2 - Wheat Snowflake: Grades 4-7

(see <http://www.wheatweaving.com> for illustrations.)

1. The classes examine wheat shafts. Discussions about the foods that they produce, like breads and cereals, begin (S5, RW4, VA4).
2. Toy possibilities and other weaving objects generated for entertainment are looked at (RW4, VA4).
3. Basket weaving from several countries is explored, including the roof and shelter applications; boats like Kon TiKi are discussed as well (RW4, S5).
4. The use of wheat in articles of clothing (for shoes and hats) further intrigues the students (RW4, VA4).
5. The unique features of wheat weaving bring to mind some Polish and Russian folk crafts made from raffia, a cousin of the wheat family, which is frequently used in basketry. Southern sweet grass baskets and containers are also explored (RW4, S5, VA4).
6. How could you weave a circular shape with this material? How could that shape become a basket or container? (M1, VA4)

#### Supply List (Snowflake)

- Six (6) straw shafts.
- About 6' of waxed string for making the ties (dental floss will work).
- One (1) 12" by 12" cardboard "pinning board" for shaping and drying the project.

#### Preparation (Snowflake)

- Prepare the straw shafts by trimming the bottom of the straw shafts off just above the first joint (node) and slip off the leaves.
- Select 6 similar straw shafts that are at least 13" long (not counting the seed heads).
- Cut off the seed heads about 1/2" below their bases.
- Soak these 6 straw shafts in hot tap water for about an hour.
- If the straw shafts begin to crack when you try to bend them, let them soak longer.

#### Steps (Snowflake)

1. After soaking the straw shafts, cut each straw shaft in half and trim all pieces to 6" lengths.
2. Line up the twelve 6" pieces side by side, placing a tie string under them at their centers.
3. While holding the straw shafts side-by-side on a flat surface, tighten the tie.
4. Let the straw shafts fan out as you tighten the knot.
5. Tie the straws together in sets of four, making all 6 ties exactly 5/8" from the center.
6. Tie the outside straw shafts from each set together.
7. Your finished ornament should look something like a snowflake. Hang it up.
8. You can vary this figure in many ways; have fun.

**Activity 3 - Angel Wheat Weaving: Grades 8-12**

(see <http://www.wheatweaving.com> for illustrations.)

1. The class is presently studying the plight of the farming communities and their struggles to keep their businesses and their land (M1, RW4, S5).
2. The economics of their situation is of great concern to the classes as are the ramifications of their situation to consumers (M1, RW4, S5).
3. The small farms that are in trouble can not compete with the large corporations, so the prices get dictated by the big companies and squeeze the little people out (RW4, S5).
4. There are issues between organic farms and industrial farms with toxic pesticides and their dangers to the consumers (RW4, S5, VA4).
5. The realization that the entire folk art form of wheat weaving is almost disappearing altogether puts a different perspective on the delicate balance our culture must survive in. Creating this artwork is almost like reviving something that is almost extinct (RW4, S5, VA4).

**Supply List (Angel)**

- Ten (10) matched straw shafts with seed heads attached (for the body and gown).
- Six matched straw shafts without heads (for wings).
- Five (5) matched straw shafts without heads (to make arms).
- Three (3) matched straw shafts without heads (to make halo).
- About 6' of waxed string for making the ties (dental floss will work).

- One 12" by 12" cardboard "pinning board" for shaping and drying the project.

**Preparation (Angel)**

- Select 24 similar straw shafts (about the same diameter and appearance).
- Trim the straws just above the first joint (node) and slip off the leaves.
- Soak these straws in hot tap water for about an hour until they feel "bouncy and flexible" (weigh them down to keep them from floating during soaking).
- If straw shafts crack when you try to bend them, let them soak longer.

**Steps (Angel)****Making the Angel Wings**

1. Select 6 soaked straw shafts
2. Cut off the seed heads 1/2" below heads.
3. Alternate the large and small ends of the straw shafts (3 each way).
4. Tie these 6 straws together in the middle while holding them flat and next to each other
5. Let the straw shafts fan out as you tighten the knot.
6. Cut the straw shafts at an angle about 2-1/2 to 3" out from the center.
7. Set wings aside.

**Making the Angel Arms**

1. Select five soaked straw shafts.

# TIES THAT BIND

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2. Cut off the seed heads 1/2" below the heads.
3. Alternate the large and small ends of the straw shafts (2 one way and 3 the other)
4. Tie the straw shafts together in the middle.
5. Make two more ties about 1 to 1-1/4" each way from the middle tie.
6. Trim ends about 3/8" beyond the last two ties to form the hands.
7. Set arms aside.

### Connecting the Angel's Arms to the Wings

1. Lay the arms on top of the wings and tie them together at their center ties.

### Making the Halo

1. Select 3 soaked straw shafts.
2. Cut off the seed heads 1/2" below the heads.
3. Tie these 3 straw shafts together about 1/2-inch from their small ends.
4. Begin braiding them at the tie and continue braiding until you have a 3" braid.
5. Make a tie at the end of the braid (do not trim the long straw shafts).
6. Form halo (loop), tie two ends of braid together.
7. Remember, leave long straw shafts connected.
8. Set the halo aside until assembling body.

### Making the Angel's Body

1. Line up 10 straw shafts so that the tops of the heads are all touching.

2. Make a firm tie about 1/4" from the heads.
3. Lay the figure on the table in front of you.
4. The seed heads are toward you and the straw shafts away from you.
5. The seed heads will be the angel's gown and the tie you just made (step 2) is the waist.
6. Lift 4 straw shafts and insert and position the arms beneath them. See page 92.
7. Make tie above arms/wings. This tie will be about 1/2" above the waist and forms the angel's neck.
8. Make another tie 3/8" above the last tie to form the top of the angel's head.
9. Turn the figure over; bring 2 straw shafts down from the back of the head.
10. You should now have 8 straw shafts left sticking up from the top of the angel's head.
11. Form the angel's hair by bringing 4 of these straw shafts down between the arms and wings.
12. Bring straw shafts to the angel's back and make another tie at the waist to lock them in place.
13. Attach halo by making another tie at waist.
14. The long straw shafts extending toward the bottom of the figure can be left long or trimmed.
15. Leaving them long makes it easy to display the figure in a bud vase.
16. Pin the still damp angel to drying board (cardboard or Styrofoam), allow it to dry overnight.



### Pre-Assessment of Existing Knowledge

1. Identify grade appropriate vocabulary that focuses on vanishing cultures, trades, and folk arts.
2. Discuss preconceived notions involving words and actions, big and small businesses.
3. Discuss preconceived notions of personal feelings and bias regarding what art is, what work ethics are and attitudes about what it means to be successful.

### Instructional Strategies

Modeling, group discussion, collaboration, independent work and individual research, brainstorming and small group work.

### The Wheatweaving Company

**Activities 1, 2 and 3** in this lesson plan are from the Wheatweaving Company's "Wheat Weaving Projects Page" and include "Traditional Mordiford" "Littlest Angel" and "6-Pointed Star (Snowflake)"

Here is the company's message to website visitors. "Visitors love our Wheatweaving Projects pages. You are welcome to print these project instructions on two conditions: 1) please keep the www.wheatweaving.com source credit on any pages that you print or copy and 2) send us an e-mail and let us know that the instructions were easy to follow or suggest ways that we could make them better. Have fun."

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