

XXVIII. FARM MACHINERY AND HARVESTING.

It was only a year or two after the clearing off of the ground, and the crop of corn had been raised, until the grounds were sown in wheat. There were no drills in those days, and the wheat had to be sown broadcast. This was done in this way: A bushel and a half or two bushels were put in a sack, and thrown over the shoulder of the "sower:" Stakes were set up at certain distances, at each side, on the top of which a white flag was attached. These were generally fifteen or twenty feet apart. The sower threw the sack over his left shoulder, the grain divided equally in the middle, with the front end partially opened so as to admit the right hand. The sower then started on his journey across the field, stepping about three feet at a stride and at every step taking out a handful of grain and sowing it "broadcast" before him. After a little experience, nearly all to whom that part of the farm work was assigned became quite expert, and the wheat came up very evenly all over the field. The ground was generally dragged with a wooden harrow drawn by a yoke of oxen. Sometimes the grain was "brushed" in; that is, the top limbs of small trees were pulled over the ground, which was an excellent substitute where harrows were not obtainable.

After the grain had grown and ripened, the next thing was to harvest it, and this was done in this part of the country, at the time of which we write, almost entirely with what was called a "sickle," an agricultural implement almost entirely unknown to the present generation of farmers. It was a small implement made of steel in a crescent shape, and having a handle fitted to a tang. It had one side of the blade notched so as always to sharpen with a serrated edge so that when inserted into the grain it would be easily cut off, the reaper holding the stocks by the tops with the left hand, and pulling steadily, but firmly, with the right hand.

Harvesting grain in this way was something that had to be learned, and without an exception those who first attempted it were sure to cut the lower part of the left little finger, which always left a scar by which he could ever after prove that he belonged to the great army of reapers. The writer has a "certificate" that he is one of 'em. Half an acre, or three-quarters, at most, was as much as the average reaper could cut and bind in a day. The swath was generally, according to the size of the man, and the reach of his arms, from three and a half to four feet in width. The operation has been described by a writer as follows: "The first movement was to cast the sickle into the standing grain, compelling it to lean somewhat toward the reaper, and then dexterously throwing forward the left leg, the grain was further led into the desired position; then by throwing around it the right leg and the left arm and hand, it was in a position to be cut off by the sickle, ten or twelve inches above the ground, and dropped from the left hand of the reaper into piles. On the return, to rest his back, the reaper, carrying the sickle on his shoulder, properly twisted into his suspender so as to hold it there, he bound into sheaves the grain he had cut through the field and started in again. Usually five to ten persons composed these bands of reapers, one man following another, and their gyratory movements at cutting a half acre each per day would be a sight to the driver of the present stately harvesters.

"Previous to 1840 the grain was thrashed, either with the flail or was tramped out with horses. Two men could flail out and winnow about twelve bushels per day, and two men and a boy, with horses, could tramp out and winnow about twenty bushels a day. The winnowing, or separating the grain from the chaff, was done by the hand sieve, pouring the mixed chaff and grain from above, two men at the ends of a bed sheet so vibrated it as to make a current of air which blew the chaff to one side, while the heavier grain fell in a pile at their feet.

The "flails" referred to above were a very awkward implement to handle, and if it so happened that he who used it was himself awkward, he would frequently get a knock on the head that would make him see stars. The handle part was about three and a half feet long, somewhat larger than an ordinary hoe handle. At the upper end a small auger hole was bored, through which a rope or cord was run. The upper part of the flail was a round piece of wood, larger than the handle, about a foot and a half long. An auger hole was bored through one end, and it was securely tied to the handle, leaving the rope a play of two or three inches. The operator raised the flail high above his head and brought it down with all the strength he could command. He kept on beating the heads of the sheaves until the grain was all loosened, when it was cleaned as above stated.

It was probably in the '40s that the "cradle" began to be introduced here. It was a wonderful improvement over the sickle, and the man who owned a cradle and knew how to use it was considered to have a fortune within his grasp. The scythe, up to that time, had been used solely to cut hay, which was cured on the ground and stacked in heaps without binding. In using these scythes, some one caught the idea that a frame with fingers that would hold the stalks of wheat and enable the cutter to lay it down with the heads together in one direction for binding, attached to the ordinary mowing scythe would be just the thing, and so it came to pass that the wheat cradle was invented. It was quite a nack to handle these cradles, and besides it was very laborious work. Usually a man could cut a swath four or five feet wide as rapidly as an expert could bind it in bundles.

It was about this time that wooden wind mills for cleaning wheat, that is, separating the chaff from grain, began to make their appearance, and this was a most valuable improvement over the old primitive method of manipulating a bed quilt or sheet for the purpose of producing wind to drive out the chaff.