FLAX-GROWING AND CLOTH-MAKING IN OLDEN TIME.

A correspondent of the *Country Gentleman* furnishes the readers of that high-toned journal the following retrospective view of flax-culture, which will be found as well worthy of perusal in this altitude as in those lower regions, where, like ourselves, many of the people are seriously contemplating a return to the more primitive and substantial regime of earlier days in our history as a nation—when the spinning wheel furnished a mellifluous bass accompaniment to the charming treble of the rosy-cheeked spinstress, and when the hand-loom and hatchel were familiar as household words:

In those days nearly every farmer had his flax ground, and many mechanics took land on shares to raise a supply for their families. The quantity of ground usually sown, varied from half an acre to as much more territory as the farmer saw fit to appropriate to the crop. The land to be sown must be dry and warm, in order to lessen the exposure to late frosts. It was usually taken from the corn or potato field of the previous year, and well manured for the previous crop, and well tilled to destroy the weeds. No manure was given the year the flax was grown, as it was supposed it would introduce many weeds, to the injury of the crop. The ground was carefully plowed with the "old wooden mould-board" plow, when plowing for wheat and oats, after which it was allowed to lie and dry until those crops were "harrowed in," when it was cross plowed and thoroughly harrowed, after which the seed, which had been previously riddled until all other seeds were sifted out, was sown in a still day, and carefully "bushed in."

The labor was now over until "pulling time," which usually was somewhere during the harvest of other crops, and the pulling was done in "lowery days," or if a shower came on and cut off other labors, the hands were turned into the flax field. If, however, a piece of cloth of unusual fineness was to be made, the flax was pulled when in blossom. If for ordinary purposes, it stood until the crop showed ripeness. When pulled, the earth was carefully shaken from the roots, and the flax evenly laid in swaths to dry. When well cured it was taken up, usually by hand, and bound for carting.

The next process was whipping, as it was termed, or beating out the seed. For this we have seen large flat stones placed on the barn floor at an angle of about 45°, or large iron kettles conveniently placed. The operator would take as much flax as could be conveniently held in both hands, and beat the boles on the stone or kettle until they were divested of seed. Each handful was carefully evened when whipped by setting the butts forcibly on the floor, and this operation was repeated after each bundle had been bound, so keeping it very even.

The next operation was spreading for rotting, which was usually done about the 20th of September. The flax was spread in swaths. If frosty nights occurred while it was rotting, it was thought beneficial from their bleaching influence.

The time of rotting depended on concurrent influences of rains, dews and fine weather, and the completion of the process was determined by taking a small handful of the flax and breaking it in the hands. If it broke easily, it was concluded the work was done, and a dry day was chosen to bind and draw it to the barn for storage. It was usually gathered in, early in October, but sometimes later, and we have known instances when snows came on unexpectedly and fastened it to the ground until spring, and this without serious injury to the fibre.

The cleaning of the seed was a matter that required much care, as on its purity its value in market depended. All foreign seeds were carefully removed. The quantity of seed to the acre was from eight to fifteen bushels. Agents came round to purchase, and paid usually $1 per bushel for the oil mills, and merchants the same in exchange for their wares.

Flax dressing, as it was termed, was a winter employment, and was usually prosecuted to the best advantage in clear, cold days. When the farmer had plenty of help, this labor was usually performed by them. For the benefit of others there were jobbers who spent their winters by dressing flax on shares, the share depending on the quality of the article and ease with which it could be reduced.

The tools for flax dressing were a brake, an instrument some six feet long set on solid blocks, to the tops of which were set from three to five horizontal slats of hard wood, some six inches deep, and brought to the edge at the upper surface. Attached to these by a hinge were corresponding slats equal in number to the spaces of the lower ones to which they were fitted, and framed into a heavy block at the opposite end, in which a handle was inserted for raising and falling it on the flax, which was held in place by the left hand, while the right worked the brake. In this process, the woody part of the flax was broken into what, in the dialect of those days, was called *shives*, or shivees. It was hetchelled, and from this passed into the hands of the *swingler*, whose tools were a swingling board some five feet high, the bottom fastened to a heavy block to keep it firm, the top brought to a smooth, even edge. Across the top of this board the flax was laid, one end being held in the hand of the swingler, while with the other hand he used the swingling knife, which was made of hard wood, the blade about four inches wide, and brought to an edge on each side. His work was finished when the shives were all beaten out, and the flax was then done up in heads of a half pound and pound each, and the heads obtained by a day's work were tied up in bundles.

The "swingle tow" was taken to the fields and left in piles to rot, and not unfrequently was burnt at evening, often making a luminous light that might be seen for miles.

The flax was submitted to another hatchelling on a fine toothed instrument, to separate the coarser from the finer material. The former, or the tow, was carded by hand, and spun on a large wheel, woven into the coarser cloth for family use, while the flax was first wound upon a distaff, and spun on a small wheel propelled by the foot of the spinner operating on a treddle. The thread of the flax was woven into articles of finer use.

When female help was sufficient, the spinning and weaving was performed by members of the family, and it was the pride of many of the spinsters of those days to exhibit the bunches of "tow yarn" or linen thread they had spun in a given period. To aid families where female help was deficient, it was often the case that young women would go out to spin. The early price for this service was sixty-six cents a week, and eventually rose to seventy-five cents. From a run and a half or thirty knots, to two runs or forty knots of thread constituted a day's work, which was accomplished earlier in the day, or later, according to the skill of the spinner.

Weaving was in many instances performed in the family on hand looms, operated entirely by physical powers. There were also professional weavers, who wove by the yard, prices varying with the quality of cloth; the usual price for weaving tow cloth was eight cents, rising in proportion as the fineness or difficulty of figure required.

The tow cloth was manufactured into bags for grain, and, in the dialect of the day, trowsers for the farmer, and was made up as it came from the loom, a stiff, brown cloth; wearing however soon softened it, and the frequent washings to which it was subject soon bleached it. The bleaching of the finer cloths was performed by dipping them in a strong lye from ashes, spreading the cloth on a clean grass plot, and as often as it dried, wetting it through the nose of a watering-pot.

Such was the process of bringing flax into cloth in the early days of New-England, and until the cheapness of cotton led to its use instead of the finer article produced by so much labor and care. Indeed, cotton has so fully superseded the use of domestic linen that the fabrication of the latter is rarely heard of. The old looms have fallen down, and the old wheels are to be found only, if at all, among the lumber of garrets. It is questionable whether many of the young have any idea how growing flax looks. Its cultivation has become nearly obsolete.

The vicissitudes which have overtaken our country, and cut off the usual supply of cotton and thereby raised it to prices almost without a parallel, have led us to the reminiscences of those early days of independence in the families of American farmers, and the inquiry suggests itself, why cannot flax growing and linen manufacture again become a prominent business of the North? Should flax growing become a business to warrant the investment, why may not our country become dotted with linen manufactories as well as those of cotton and woo? This would materially lessen the cost of cloth, and be an immense saving from the labor of olden time. The cost of labor in raising the material may perhaps be as great as formerly, but the process of harvesting, cleaning off the seed and rotting, might no doubt be abbreviated, so that the cloth could actually be afforded at one-fourth the cost of early times. At this time, when dependence is very inconvenient and rather expensive, may we not hope that Northern enterprise will be directed in this matter, and that flax growing and linen cloth manufacturing will become a prominent business of the country?

It has been a matter of no little surprise with us, on making inquiries as to the success and progress of flax culture among the agriculturists of Deseret, to learn that this important branch of husbandry has been grossly neglected, if not by the mass, abandoned.

There may have been existing causes considered good and sufficient for all this; but such neglect, in our judgment, does not well comport with the unyielding patience in labor and determination to independence in other matters so discernible and which has achieved for us, with the accompanying favor of a propitious Benefactor, results astounding to others as they were paramount in importance to ourselves.

It cannot be denied that some little flax was raised last year, the seed of which, so far as brought forward to market, has furnished some material for the mastication of President Kimball's oil mill, but not enough to employ it one fifth of the time. The quantity of flax required to produce this amount of seed would not be much more than sufficient for the manufacture of linen thread for the people of this Territory—leaving altogether out of the calculation that required in the manufacture of cordage, toweling, shirting and other fabrics for wearing apparel.

Flax growing in the Northern States is again becoming, from the very urgency of circumstances—the scarcity and consequent exorbitant prices of cotton goods—an important branch of farming. Hitherto, for a succession of years past, whereever linen was manufactured in this country, the flax has been mostly imported. For linen thread making, prepared flax has been imported from Germany at a high duty, greatly enhancing the price of the thread. This, it is stated, must be pulled before ripe and artificially rotted in vats of water at a given temperature.

Some brief hints as to soil, time of sowing, &c., will not be out of place—it being our aim to do all we can, not only to urge the farmer to bestow more attention upon the culture of flax, but also to rightly direct his exertions by timely and approved suggestions derived from the most reliable sources at our command.

A deep, rich, moist loam is generally deemed best adapted to flax growing; though it will do well on gravelly land with plenty of water.

The exact time of sowing must of course be modified by the season, whether early or late. The 10th of May is given as a general rule in the Eastern States—though it may be sown earlier where desirable, as a little frost will do no harm to the seed when in the ground. The time of corn-planting is probably as definite as any rule that may be given for sowing flax in this locality. It is essential that the ground designed for flax should be made and kept perfectly clean from weeds. The mixture of weeds with our flax has hitherto deteriorated its market value; for, as may be seen at a glance, the pure is in every respect worth more than mixed seed.

The quantity to be sown to the acre will depend on the use that is to be made of the fibre—whether for cordage, coarse or fine fabrics. To produce a delicate fibre, sow the more seed. For fine linen, three to four bushels per acre is not excessive: while for coarser goods, from one to two and a half bushel will give the required strength of thread. For medium quality about about two bushels per acre. The time of pulling has also much to do with the quality of the fibre, as already stated.

Flax seed in New York, a few years since, was worth only one dollar per bushel. It is now worth about four dollars and the price steadily advancing. The flax, reduced to lint, is in active demand at the rate of 25 @ 30 cts. per lb. for army use, in stopping effusions of blood—which, it is feared, may largely draw on the quantity of flax annually produced for years to come, without seriously checking the purple torrent's flow. The production of flax in the East, however, even to be used in the shape of lint, will be among the most remunerative crops to the individual farmer; though acting as a leech to the government: yet there is no question that, if any considerable quantity be grown, beyond that required on battle-fields and in army hospitals, the necessities existing for domestic linens as substitutes for cotton sheetings, &c., will soon force it into the hands of the manufacturer.

Of lint, from three to five hundred pounds are usually obtained per acre and from seven to twelve bushels of seed.

There are various modes of rotting the flax. One of the latest recommended, that we have seen is, that recently discovered in Lower Canada, by which flax can be prepared for the mill with very little trouble or expense, and which is said to answer as well as steeping; and that is, to spread the flax on a meadow in December, and allow it to remain on the ground until April. The snow rots it effectually, and when the snow goes off in March or April, the flax is found to be clean and dry, ready for carting to the scutch mill, without any expense worth mentioning. This is a matter, however, that may be safely left with those experienced in the business—though it is not to be presumed that even those most skilled in this or any other department of home industry would spurn at any judicious suggestions that might be offered for their consideration and benefit.

We wish more especially to induce or urge the culture of flax upon the attention of our farmers. It is a branch of agriculture whose present important bearing in our future well-being as a people cannot be overrated. It should not—it must not be neglected. There is not wool enough grown in this Territory to clothe the people, should all means of obtaining supplies from abroad be cut off. With the aid of what supplies of cotton we may reasonably look for from "Dixie," there will still be a deficiency, at least for some time to come.

Whatever may be our anticipations as to the future, or the vast changes for the better to be brought to pass in our circumstances by the lapse of time, a due providence for our immediate wants is an imperative obligation that we owe to ourselves, as individuals and as a community. Anticipations of good to come may do well in theorizing; but they do not supply the substantials essential to a continuance in mortality till "the good time coming" shall have receded and given place to the fullest realization of our hopes. Till then, labor we must. It may be that our own indefatigable labors will play no indifferent part in the consummation of the bright visions of glory which occasionally flit across the mind when clambering up the more rugged steps in the pathway of human existence. That they will accomplish for us infinitely more than the idly gazing upon castles of air, or listlessly awaiting the favorable revolution of fortune's wheel, is most certain.