

XXVI. CLEARING UP FARMS.

The clearing up of farms was the hardest work the pioneer farmer had to do. The land was mostly covered with a heavy growth of timber, which had to be cut down and rolled into log heaps, and the limbs, etc., piled into what was called "brush heaps" and burned, which, as the timber was green and full of sap, was a very slow process, and frequently took several seasons before the chunks were all consumed. The slaughter of the very best kind of timber in those early days is something fearful to contemplate now by the people living away down here three-quarters of a century since then, when the country has been almost entirely denuded of some of the finest timber that ever grew out of the earth. At that time there was no particular use for it, and the only object was how best and the cheapest way to get rid of it. The finest stately poplars, the tall oaks, the ash, and above all the different varieties of walnut, of which the black walnut was afterwards found to be the most valuable because particularly adapted to the manufacture of furniture, came down by the woodman's ax. In after years the walnut timber that grew upon the land was found to be more valuable than the land itself.

When the timber on a piece of land had been felled and was ready to roll, the neighbors for miles around were invited to a "log rolling" and with several yoke of oxen to help in hauling the logs together, the work was soon done. The ground was generally covered with underbrush and small saplings, and the roots had to be taken out with a mattock and grubhoe, and this primitive implement had to be operated by main strength, and those who know how it is themselves know that it was the hardest kind of work. Stock, such as cattle, hogs, sheep and horses, ran at large, and so the clearing had to be fenced, and this was done with rails split from the trees near by. An iron wedge, a few "gluts," an ax and a maul were the implements used, and as in "grubbing," the splitting had to be done by main force.

To fence a forty-acre lot was a long, tedious job, and many a man ruined his health by long continuance at this kind of labor. But after this work was done, there was a harder job still—that of plowing the ground. There were no chilled plows in those days, and the first plowing of the ground was nearly always done with a large breaking plow and wooden moldboard, to which were hitched two or three or more yoke of oxen. When the ground had been gone over it had more the appearance of having been rooted up by the hogs than having been turned over with a plow. Plows met with roots and stones every few rods, and many is the time that he who held the plow handles was hit in the side or in the umbilical region by the handles when the plow struck a big root, and had the breath knocked out of him before he knew what the matter was. Usually the first crop planted was corn, and between the rows was planted the old-fashioned "Hoosier punkin." It was worth all that was raised to keep the chipmunks, wild squirrels, blackbirds and crows from stealing all seed that was planted. Usually the corn rows near the fence and woods have to be replanted two or three times, and even then if half the hills came up it would almost invariably be destroyed while in the roasting-ear it matured.

The ground was very rich, and it was a race from start to finish between the weeds and corn as to which could outgrow the other. The weeds that caused the most trouble, and were the greatest annoyance, were the wild nettles. To touch them was equal to the sting of a bee, and the more one tried to keep clear of them the more one was sure to run into them. As soon as the ears of corn turned from the milk into the grain they were used by the family for food. They were cooked in various ways, whichever was the most convenient. They were boiled, roasted before the fire, the grain cut off the cob and fried, or boiled in a kettle with beans, with a piece of pork for seasoning; and when a fellow was real hungry, with a piece of hot corn bread, and a bowl of sweet milk, there was nothing like it in the heavens above or in the earth beneath.

When the corn ripened, and before the frost came, the stocks were cut off close to the ground and set up in shocks of the proper size, larger at the bottom and small at the top, tied with a band made of smaller stalks or of bark or grass.

It was after the corn had been cut and shocked from one of these fields that our own Hoosier poet, James Whitcomb Riley, drew his inspiration for that charming bit of poetry that touches a tender chord in the breast of everyone who has breathed the pure air of country life and the farm, and which is inserted here as a fitting conclusion, to this brief sketch :

When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock,
 And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin' turkey, cock,
 And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,
 And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence ;
 O it 'I? then's the time a feller is a-feelin' at his best,
 With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peaceful rest,
 As he leaves the house, bare-headed, and goes out to feed the stock,
 When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.

They's something kindo' harty-like about the atmosphere
 When the heat of summer's over and the coolin' fall is here
 Of course we miss the flowers, and the blossoms on the trees,
 And the mumble of the hummin 'birds and buzzin' of the bees;
 But the air's so appetizin, and the landscape through the haze
 Of a crisp and sunny morning of the airy autumn days
 Is a pictur' that no painter has the colorin' to mock
 When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.
 The husky, rusty rustle of the tassels of the corn,
 And the raspen' of the tangled leaves, as golden as the morn;
 The stubble in the furries-kindo' lonesome-like, but still
 A-preachin' sermons to us of the barns they growed to fill;
 The strawstack in the meader, and the reaper in the shed ;
 The hosses in their stalls below-the clover overhead!
 O it sets my heart a-clickin' like the tickin' of a cloek,
 When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock!

When your apples all is gethered, and the ones a feller keeps
 Is poured around the cellar-floor in rea and yeller heaps,
 And your cider-makin's over, and your wommern-folks is through
 With their mince and apple-butter, and their souse and sausage too,-

I don't know how to tell it – but ef such a thing could be
 As the angel's wantin' boarding, and they'd call around on me,
 I'd want to 'commodate 'em all, the whole endurin' flock,
 When the frost in on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock!