THE GREAT STEAM-WAGON.

The object of this article is to preserve the memory of one of the picturesque episodes of the freighting days; those days that were so brief, yet so full of events. This was the project of superseding ox-power with steam power without the trouble of building a railroad; trains of wagons were to be drawn across the plains as before, but by means of a ponderous engine. Such a saving of time and money was hereby to be effected that the freighting business was to be revolutionized, and the Pacific Railroad perhaps rendered unnecessary.

It was very promising, and who can say what different lines the development of the West might have followed, if the machine had only worked?

The steam wagon made a great sensation, and still occupies a goodly place in the memories of the old-timers. This article, however, is prepared independently of reminiscences; it is compiled entirely from contemporaneous newspaper notices, unearthed from THE CONSERVATIVE'S unique files. It is hoped, notwithstanding, that its appearance may serve to provoke some of the pioneers to set down for posterity what they remember of the affair. THE CONSERVATIVE would be especially glad to obtain a picture of the steam wagon itself. It was photographed, by either Hare or Williams, the "ambrotypists" of the day, and copies must undoubtedly be in existence somewhere; if one can be secured, THE CONSERVATIVE will be pleased to have a cut made from it and perpetuate it in its columns.

Things were very lively on the plains in 1862. Mormons, "Pike's-Peakers" and Oregon emigrants were moving west in great numbers, and supplies for them and for the settlements and military posts kept the great highways burdened. The rivalry among the river towns, each advocating the route to which it was the gateway, was keen. But one railway, the Hannibal & St. Joseph, had reached the Missouri, and freight and passengers were conveyed by steamboat thence or from St. Louis to such other point as they elected to begin their overland journey from. All the river towns were soliciting the business, and kept agents and distributed literature throughout the East, properly to expose their several claims. The route from Nebraska City to Fort Kearney, known as the "Great Central Route," had undeniable advantages, being the shortest by forty miles and having fewer natural obstacles than many of the others. Much traffic therefore came this way. The number of The News preceding that in which the steam wagon makes its appearance, chronicles the arrival from Denver of Mr. R. M. Rolfe, and states that he counted, between Denver and Fort Kearney, 2514 wagons moving westward, of which 700 had come over the Nebraska City line, leaving 1800 for the others; of which there were five of principal importance, besides the minor ones.

Into this state of things the steam-wagon fell out of a clear sky, like a gift from the gods dropped into Nebraska City's lap. If Nebraska City had not counted so confidently on the gods, things would perhaps be different today; but that is another story.

The News, then, in its issue of July 19, 1862, publishes the following, under the heading: "The Great Central Route—Its Advantages Appreciated."

"Very much to the agreeable surprise of the citizens of this place, the West Wind landed at our levee, on Monday morning last, the first locomotive engine which ever pressed the soil of Nebraska. It is the Prairie Motor, designed for the transportation of passengers and goods over ordinary roads.

"Gen. J. R. Brown, of Minnesota, the Proprietor has an intimate acquaintance with the nature of western highways; and appreciating the advantages of a road which has no streams of any consequence to cross, selected the Central Route from Nebraska City as the one upon which to make his trial trips. * * * We have no doubt of the ultimate success of the experiment."

Much more space is devoted to the steam wagon in this number than to McClellan's operations against Richmond, then in progress. It gives a complimentary personal notice to the staff of the enterprise, which consisted of two engineers, a fireman and a colored servant. A detailed description of the machine itself is also given. It was made, we learn, by John A. Reed, 63 Liberty St., New York. It had four engines of ten horse-power each; the steering wheels were six feet in diameter, and the drivers ten feet with eighteen-inch tread. The consumption of fuel was said to be at the rate of one cord of wood in eight hours, with provision for carrying four hours' supply of wood and water.

This item is of interest, in view of the fact that the failure of the enterprise is ascribed by some to the fuel difficulty. Four hours' stock of wood seems, indeed, to be scanty to cross the gaps between timber on the plains with. Other accounts of the failure are that the engine was stuck in a V-shaped gully, and that the bridges along the route were too weak for it.

On the arrival of the West Wind, "steam was raised, and the wagon propelled itself from the deck to the levee," surmounting a grade of one foot in six, which was surely a severe test of its hill-climbing powers.

It rested on the levee over night, and the next morning was brought up town. It was not thought safe, however, to venture on any of the bridges over South Table Creek with it, so it was taken over the hill to the old ford, which was the only means of communication, before the days of bridges, between the river-front and the town itself. This ancient ford is used today by a few people who live near it, but aside from them there are perhaps not a hundred people in town who could go to its site.

As the machine climbed "Kearney Heights," it was necessary to cross a plowed garden, and this was accomplished, although the ground was saturated with a drizzling rain. It ran smoothly up the remainder of the hill, thence down through a patch of hazel bushes and sumac, and descended to the rock ford, "turning at the bottom of the hill an angle too sharp for an ordinary freighting team and wagon." Then "crossing the ford, upon a bed of loose stones, it came up from the creek, a distance of six or eight rods over a grade of 960 feet to the mile—the rain still falling, and the soil very slippery." Thence it "moved easily" up Sixth street to Main, and halted for the night near the Seymour House—the building which was torn down this summer, next to the Dr. Kay place.

"Nebraska soil," says the editor, "when freshly wet, is like so much grease; and under the circumstances, our only wonder is that the machine run at all except upon level ground."

Then, in the local column, appears this notice: "The citizens of Nebraska City are requested to meet today in front of the old Block House to discuss and take certain measures for the general advantage of the city."

By the week following the outfit had sailed. "☛ The Prairie Motor left this city on Tuesday evening last, for Denver, via the Great Central Route. It ran over the two steep hills just west of town with apparent 'ease and comfort' itself. It will not reach Denver for several weeks, as it is the intention of the proprietor to have all necessary grading, bridge strengthening, etc., done on the outward trip. The road once put in order, the machine can then make its trips regularly and on time."

We further find an account of the public assembly, which is called (with a purpose) "a Mass Meeting of the citizens of Otoe county." General Isaac Coe called the meeting to order, and Judge Kinney "stated the object of the meeting to be to give countenance and encouragement to the enterprise of Gen. J. R. Brown, in running a Steam Wagon on the roads from Nebraska City to Denver." Hons. H. H. Harding, J. F. Kinney, J. Metcalf, Wm. H. Taylor and Wm. L. Boydston were designated to draft resolutions, and reported among others the following, preceded by a suitable number of Whereases: "That we hail with pleasure this new and successful application of steam, in the propulsion of wagons across our beautiful and fertile prairies.

"That we have the fullest confidence in the entire future success of the enter-