

WILLIAM A. PAXTON A DEVELOPER OF WESTERN EMPIRE

Some Incidents in the Busy Life of a Man Who Has Done His Share in Opening Up the Wilderness and Making It a Wonderful Hive of Agricultural, Industrial and Commercial Activity

HALF a century of residence in Nebraska will be completed by W. A. Paxton, pioneer railroad and telegraph builder, freighter and cattle raiser, January 13, 1907. It was just fifty years ago he crossed the Missouri river in a snow storm and began his career in the young territory as a bridge builder on the government road from Omaha to Kearney.

During this time he has seen the state develop from the territory in which most of the land owners held only a precarious title to their property by the law of club and six-shooter to the rich agricultural state, one of the wealthiest in the union, considering its population. He has had a chance and has taken advantage of the opportunity of being one of the foremost factors in building up the commonwealth financially, industrially, socially and politically. He was one of those who foresaw the future possibilities of the state and he took advantage of it and as a result instead of a penniless bridge foreman, he has long ago become one of the foremost men in the development of the west. His interests now are manifold and branch out in nearly all departments of industry. He is credited with being the pioneer in the establishment of the great cattle industry in Nebraska and the progressive spirit he showed in those early days has marked his business policy ever since.

A life such as this is always filled with interest both for the other pioneers who underwent the same trials and hardships and witnessed the same miracles in the building up of the state, and for those who came later and for the younger generation who found on their arrival in the state a comparatively high condition of development. His life, like the lives of most of the pioneers of the rugged type, is full of human interest and thrilling incidents.

Mr. Paxton is a native Kentuckian. He was born January 26, 1837, and his early life was spent in the country. His father was a native of Virginia of Scotch ancestry and he inherited the rugged virtues of his ancestors. William got his early education in the schools of his native state and in 1849 moved with his father to Middleton, Montgomery county, Missouri. His father continued his occupation of farming, but the following year William left home and started out for himself.

Boyhood Devoted to Work

At the age of 13 he began working on a farm for \$8 a month and remained in this position for a year and a half. Then, desiring to branch out for himself, he purchased an ox team and began breaking prairie for the farmers on his own hook. Four years after he left home he was placed in charge of a farm by M. J. Ragan, at the princely salary of \$200 a year, which was the highest paid for that kind of work in the county. He continued in Mr. Ragan's employ for four years and when Mr. Ragan got a contract with the government for the building of the bridges on the old military road between Omaha and Fort Kearney he sent Mr. Paxton to Omaha to take charge of the work as foreman.

It was January 13, 1857, a blustery, snowy day, that he crossed the river and got his first glimpse of the country which was to be the scene of his active life. He was ferried across the river at Bellevue and came up this side of the river to the little settlement called Omaha.

He found only a small cluster of houses strung along Farnam street. The creek that runs through what is now Hanscom park was then covered with trees and brush and along its banks, in what is now the Hanscom park district, was a village of thirty-five lodges of Pawnee Indians. This was a favorite camping ground for the Indians and at that time they were very friendly toward the whites, so little trouble was had with them. The Pawnees were located on an Indian reservation on the Platte river in what is now Saunders county. Later they were sent to Genoa and afterward to Indian Territory.

Mr. Paxton rented four small office rooms at Eighteenth and Farnam streets for \$100 a month, opened up his headquarters and began to get ready for his bridge work. The new road was being built by the government principally for military purposes and in order to provide easy access to Fort Kearney, which was then a frontier post and the basis of a number of campaigns against the hostile red skins. He constructed the bridges across North Omaha creek, Saddle creek, the two Pappios and the Elkhorn river before the end of the year, and then continued the work, throwing structures across the Rawhide, Shell creek, Prairie creek west of Columbus and Wood river, making an open road to Kearney.

These were strenuous years for the young bridge builder and it was necessary more than once to make a show of nerve in order to get along. The territory government was to a great extent on a "six-shooter" basis and the man who was quickest with his gun won the greatest respect. The settlers had located on land before it was surveyed and some of them on more than the legal amount of land, and had organized a "claim club" to protect what they termed their rights. Owing to the irregularity of their proceedings the claims of large numbers of them were not recognized by the government and the land they were living on was still considered by the officials government land.

Combat With Claim Club

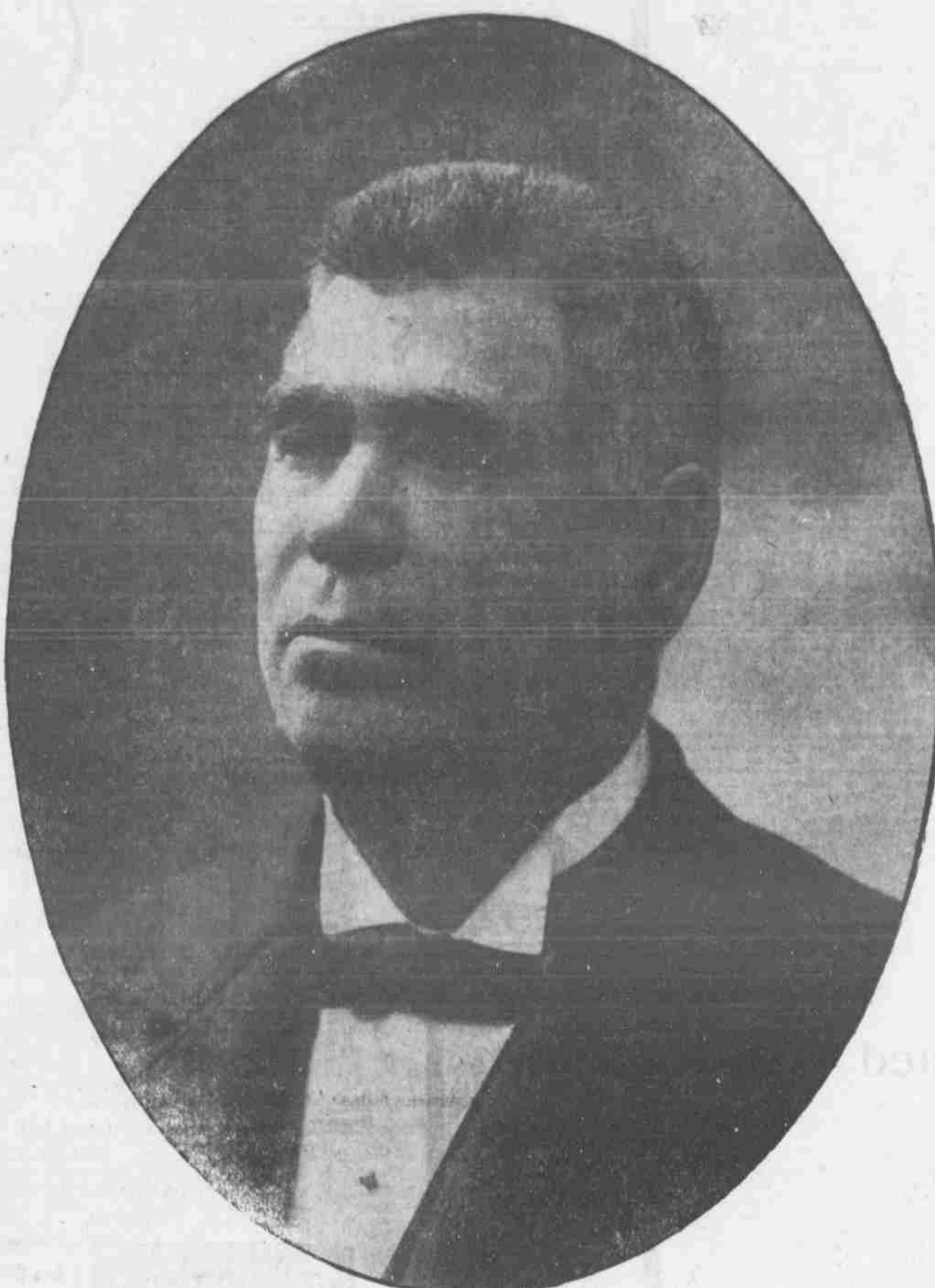
The claim club constituted a kind of vigilante committee to see that the interests of the members were not encroached upon by newcomers who might file on claims already occupied or do something to prejudice the interest of the favored ones. The club had no authority in law and they used a game of bluff and depended on terrorizing persons who dared oppose them.

It is recorded that numerous persons who settled on land already claimed were driven out of the territory under pain of death. Threats of hanging were freely made when a newcomer became obdurate and insisted on asserting his rights. One Irishman was taken down to the river in mid-winter and ducked three times through a hole in the ice before he would consent to sign a relinquishment of his claims. He did this finally, but almost lost his life through exposure. These incidents show the desperate character of the people who exercised great influence in the new country.

Mr. Paxton's work brought him in constant conflict with this club. Under his orders he was authorized to cut wood for his bridges from any government land in the neighborhood. The wilderness around Hanscom park abounded in fine large trees and he got much of his timber from there. But this land was also claimed by members of the club and frequently the bridge gang was brought face to face with a band of determined claimants with drawn revolvers.

On one occasion a gang of them destroyed a lot of timber which had been cut ready to be placed in bridges. When Mr. Paxton went to get it he was met by the men with guns in their hands. The teamsters did not stay to see what was going to happen, but took to the woods. Mr. Paxton was alone except for a large ferocious hound which was his constant companion. The leader of the claim club gang approached with drawn gun in a threatening attitude. Mr. Paxton did not dare draw his gun, for it would mean a shooting scrape that would end in death for one. He gave a quiet signal to the dog and the animal, with almost human intelligence, sprang up, placed his front paws on the shoulders of the leader and stuck his muzzle up into the face of the man with a grimace that made him weaken. Mr. Paxton then backed away, and went to the representative of the army, who was stationed here as an inspector of the bridge work. He explained the action of the claim club gang and the officer, who was somewhat eccentric, sent for the leader and told him he would have a regiment here from Rock Island if there was any more interference. Then he made the members who had destroyed the bridge timbers go up the river and cut some more and deliver them. This is one of many incidents that shows the character of the times and the difficulties that had to be overcome.

It was about this time that the first hard financial crisis in Nebraska began. Times were very bad in 1857-8. Practically the only money in the state was in the form of script, from what were known as wild cat banks, and the failure of some of these institutions left business in a very unsettled state. There was little immediate prospect for a good opening for a young man without capital,



W. A. PAXTON.

and Mr. Paxton went back to his old home in Missouri in 1858, and in February of that year was married to Miss Mary Jane Ware, daughter of James W. Ware. The next two years were spent in farming, but with small success. The opportunities in Omaha and Nebraska again appealed to him and in 1860 he came back, leaving his wife, temporarily, with her parents.

Freighting and Contracting

He first began freighting between Omaha and Denver, but soon gave this up to join the party that was working for Edward Creighton, constructing the Western Union Telegraph company's line between the east and the coast. The line had already been built as far west as Kearney and the gang began its construction work there.

The route of the line lay along the south side of the Platte river, from Kearney to Julesburg, then back across the river and up Pole creek and across the divide. The construction party from the east side of the mountains met the one from the west, between Bridges, Utah, and Salt Lake City. Mr. Paxton was still ready working for Ragan, his old employer, who had a subcontract. The country through which the line was built was entirely new and was filled with Indians, some of them hostile. But little difficulty was encountered from them because of the size of the force of men employed on the line. At one time there were in the neighborhood of 10,000 men, 1,000 ox teams and as many mule teams in the army of construction. The Indians did not dare attack as large a party

of whites as this. A number of the men with this party afterward became well known for the part they took in the development of the west. One of these was Charles H. Brown, and Mr. Paxton has a large picture of him hanging in his office, with an inscription in Mr. Brown's handwriting, reminding him they chopped wood together in 1861.

When he returned from this trip his heart once again turned toward home and he went back to Missouri, where he renewed his attempts to make farming pay. The civil war was now on and he had hardly got well established when practically everything he had was swept away and he was left with very little capital. He came back to Nebraska with his wife and landed in Omaha July 7, 1863, with \$135 in money. Turning to the first employment that would help pay expenses and enable him to rebuild his fortunes, he went to work in a livery stable for \$50 a month as foreman. Shortly after this he went back to freighting between Omaha and Denver and Fort Laramie. At that time there was no railroad west of the Missouri river, and there was plenty of work to do hauling the necessities of life across the plains to the population in Colorado and Wyoming.

It was about this time Mr. Paxton really launched out into a business that proved the foundation of his fortune. From his friend, Edward Creighton, he purchased an ox team for \$1,050 on four months' time, and so profitable was the venture that in a short time he had paid the money and had his team and a neat sum besides.

By 1864 he had \$1,800 laid up, which was his nest egg. He continued for two more years in the freighting business, gradually adding to his capital, and in 1867 took a contract for the building of the first ten miles of the Union Pacific railroad west of Julesburg. He concentrated a large gang of men on the work and did contract work at various places on the Union Pacific during the year following. He had an army of 6,000 men and 1,500 teams. He moved this immense force from Rock Creek, Wyo., to Green River and then to Tie Siding, where he was employed for some time furnishing ties for the railroad construction gangs. In the winter of 1868-9 he closed out his work there and returned to Omaha.

Pioneer in Cattle Business

His contracts on the railroad had netted him \$14,500 and with this he launched out into the cattle business, an industry at that time entirely undeveloped and of which a far-sighted man, such as Mr. Paxton has proved himself to be, could already, even at that early time, see the vast possibilities. The wide prairies were still the grazing pastures for large herds of buffalo, and if these animals could live and thrive in a wild state here, why not utilize the grassy wastes for domestic cattle? The importance of this decision to go into the cattle industry can be realized when it is remembered that before this time the possibilities of the plains states had not been understood, even by many people who were more or less familiar with them. It was a start in a business that afterward spread over Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, the Dakotas, and finally concentrated in South Omaha as a packing center and outlet to the hungry hordes of the east. With his small capital he invested in a herd of cattle at Abilene, Kan., and, bringing them up north, sold them at a profit of \$12,000. This was in 1869, and the same year he purchased a tenth interest in the newly-formed Omaha & Northwestern railroad, which had incorporated with a dozen prominent Omaha men on its list of stockholders.

The new road was one of several that were being built out of Omaha to tap the territory not touched by the new Union Pacific. It pushed its way up toward Blair and Herman and later to Tekamah. It was sold later and has since passed into the hands of the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha road. Mr. Paxton built the first twenty miles of this road and then turned his attention more exclusively to the cattle business again. In 1870, with Jack Morrow and J. W. Bosler, he went into the cattle contracting business and contracted to supply beef to the Indian agencies in the west. The vast extent of this business may be seen from the fact they furnished from 23,000 to 75,000 head of cattle annually to the government. The animals were driven across the plains for long distances and many interesting stories are told of brushes with straggling Indians and with the difficulties of preventing the cattle from stampeding with herds of buffalo. In 1873, while still in the contracting business, Mr. Paxton started a ranch at Ogalalla, which is pointed out as the forerunner of the modern cattle ranch and of the cattle business in the western part of the state. Most of his attention was directed to this ranch during the next few years. The industry flourished in his hands and in 1883 he had 22,000 head of cattle on the ranch. About that time he sold the ranch for \$675,000.

Growth of Omaha Interests

One of his first large ventures in an industrial way in Omaha was the firm of Paxton & Gallagher, which was one of the pioneers in Omaha's jobbing trade. In 1886 the Paxton & Vierling Iron Works company was founded. Both of these companies have come to be among the leading industries of the city. Almost overshadowing in its importance to the city, and, in fact, to the entire west, was the establishment of the Union stock yards at South Omaha and the building up of the Magic City and the immense packing industries there. Mr. Paxton was one of the first to realize the advantageous position of Omaha as a center, in which the cattle of the western plains could be concentrated, killed and dressed for the eastern markets. The whole configuration of the western country pointed toward Omaha as the place for this industry, and even before the cattle industry had developed far its possibilities were seen. The two important railroads passing through Omaha—the Union Pacific and the Burlington—annually hauled vast numbers of cattle, horses and hogs through Omaha than passed through Kansas City. Omaha was contiguous not only to Kansas, Colorado and Wyoming, but also to the Dakotas. Early tables show that these figures were very carefully scanned by the men in whose minds the idea of an immense packing center in Omaha first took root. The first move in the direction of organizing the company was made in 1876, but this did not have sufficient local backing and was not carried to a successful conclusion. In 1878 the project was revived and two rival companies—one headed by A. P. Nicholas and the other by William A. Paxton—were formed. Both companies began business southwest of the city, but in the winter of 1878 and 1879 Mr. Paxton's company moved across the river to Council Bluffs and shortly afterward the Nicholas company turned its business over to the Union Pacific railroad after suffering a heavy loss. All through this period the stock yards idea was in embryo, and a number of small companies were started, but none of them succeeded. In 1882 Alexander H. Swan, a large cattle owner in Wyoming, took up the plan of starting yards in Omaha. He took into his confidence Leverett M. Anderson, and it was the first intention to secure about 200 acres of land south of the city for the enterprise. Then the plans were enlarged and over 1,800 acres of land now covered by the city of South Omaha was bought up.

New Stock Yards Company

In the fall of 1883 the proposition was laid before Mr. Paxton, who was still interested in the stock yards across the river, and he at once decided to invest in the venture and induce his friends to go into it with him. He was one of the incorporators of the new Union Stock Yards company of Omaha, the others being Alexander H. Swan, John A. Creighton, Peter E. Iler, John A. McShane, Thomas Swobe and Frank Murphy. The capital stock was fixed at \$1,000,000 and the articles gave the company a wide scope, including not only the buying and selling of live stock, but the killing, slaughtering and packing of it as well. Mr. Paxton was elected president and has been one of the prime movers.

Hardly secondary in importance to this enterprise was the subsidiary one of the development of the city of South Omaha. Up to the establishment of the stock yards there, the country now included in the city limits was entirely farm land. The Syndicate and Land company was formed to finance and carry out the plan to secure and dispose of the land on which the new city was to be located. Mr. Paxton was an important member of the syndicate and acted as one of the trustees, by whom the property was held to secure the payment of the \$1,400,000 bonds issued by the syndicate. The city was laid out and within two years was flourishing.

Mr. Paxton has always been interested financially in real estate in Omaha, and one of his investments was the large building at Sixteenth and Farnam streets, which bears his name. His investments have been profitable and include many and varied industries. Politically he has never pushed himself forward to any great extent. He was a member of the Nebraska legislature at its twenty-fourth session, commencing January 4, 1881, and was a senator in the twenty-ninth session, which began January 1, 1889.

In private life he has been noted for his big-heartedness and his genial nature. He has always been, in spite of his busy life, a man who is easy to meet, and his old-time friends have been among his best. The old scenes which recalled the struggle of his early days have always been dear to him, and he remarked in conversation not long ago that, until they were destroyed, he had paid frequent visits to the old stumps in the Hanscom Park district, where he had secured the timbers for the bridges he built on the old military road as a youth of 20 years. He has a vivid memory of the stirring occurrences of those days, and for this reason is an entertaining conversationalist when his mind turns back to pioneer times.

Thanksgiving and Rejoicing Day

THANKSGIVING DAY in America began as a public rejoicing over a good harvest—the first reaped by the New England colonists—and maintained some of its ancient flavor to this day. The idea is as old as history. It finds expression in various ways in all countries and climes. Gratitude is the keynote of the observance everywhere.

After the first harvest of the colonists at Plymouth in 1621 Governor Bradford sent four men out fowling that they might rejoice and celebrate in feasting together. In July, 1623, a day of fasting and prayer was appointed on account of the drouth. Rain came while the people were praying and the governor appointed a day for thanksgiving which was observed with religious service. There was a similar change of fast-day into Thanksgiving in 1631, when supplies came from Ireland. All of these earlier appointments, however, were made at various seasons of the year and for special purposes—usually for the timely arrival of ships with supplies—but in later years on account of the harvests. This substituted a fixed Thanksgiving day late in the fall after the harvest time was over, and also the celebration of the day by first a religious service and then a feast. When the revolutionary war began Thanksgiving had become a national holiday and was annually recommended by congress. However, after the general thanksgiving for peace in 1784 there was no national appointment until 1789, when President Washington, by a request of congress, recommended setting aside a day of thanks for the adoption of

the constitution. In later years, during the civil war, Lincoln issued a proclamation recommending a special thanksgiving for victory in 1862 and 1863. Since then proclamations have been made by the president and governors of the various states, and custom has fixed the date on the last Thursday in November.

Different peoples have different times, but always some time, for harvest thanksgiving. When the Jew inhabited Palestine the festival of Pentecost embraced a thanksgiving for a plentiful harvest; but as the wheat is not gathered in Europe at the time of the Pentecost, flowers take the place of the first fruits in the synagogues there. The Druids had their harvest festival on November 1; the Chinese and Japanese have theirs at their year's close.

The second of the three great festivals of the Jewish ecclesiastical year occurs on the sixth and seventh days of the third month (Sivan), which includes part of May and June. It is called in Hebrew, Shavuot, but more generally the feast of the Pentecost, the fiftieth day, since it commemorates the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai fifty days after the deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt. It is also called the Feast of Weeks, because it marks the completion of seven weeks, counted from the second day of Passover, or Pentecost.

In the old simple days of England the Harvest Home was such a scene as Horace's friends might have expected to see at his Sabine farm. The grain last cut was brought home in its wagon called the Hock Cart—surmounted by a figure formed of

sheaf with gay dressings—suggesting a representation of the goddess Ceres—while a pipe and tabor went merrily sounding in front and the reapers tripped around in a hand-in-hand ring, singing:

"Harvest home, harvest home,
We have plowed, we have sowed,
We have reaped, we have mowed,
We have brought home every load.
Hip, hip, hip, harvest home!"

In the evening of Harvest Home the supper takes place in the barn or some other suitable place, the master and mistress generally presiding. This feast is always composed of substantial food with plenty of good ale.

Japan has two Thanksgivings festivals in honor of the harvest, both of which are observed as official holidays. On the 17th of October the Harvest Thanksgiving called Kan-name Matsuri, or the Divine Tasting, is celebrated. The second harvest festival, called the Shin-Sho-Sai, is celebrated on November 23. On the occasion of this festival the first sheaf of rice grown within the imperial grounds is, by religious tradition, reaped and offered by the emperor to the divine ancestors as a harvest offering. He also offers to the Sun-goddess the first-new silk of the year.

In the famous temples of Ise, in the neighborhood of Yamama, are the shrines of the goddesses in whose honor those festivals are held. There are two temples, the Naku (inner temple) and the Geku or outer temple. The Naku is sacred to the Sun-goddess, the great ruler of heaven; the Geku is dedicated to the Goddess of Food.

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