The Ingle Nook.

Rules for correspondence in this and other Departments: (1) Kindly write on one side of paper only. (2) Always send name and address with communications. If pen name is also given the real name will not be published. (3) When enclosing a letter to be forwarded to anyone, place it in a stamped envelope ready to be sent on. When a prompt reply, or a personal reply, is desired, do not forget to enclose a 2-cent stamp.

A Pioneer Industry.

Irish Linen Weavers Brought Their Skill to the Talbot Settlement and Elgin County Still Cherishes Bits of Their Linen.

THE linen industry began in this part of Canada over a century ago, when a band of settlers arrived at Port Talbot in July, 1809. Judge Ermatinger tells us in the "Talbot Regime" that Colonel Talbot gave them a kindly welcome, being especially pleased because they brought their looms and spinning wheels with them.

The party came from Erie, Pennsylvania, and was composed of Pattersons, Pearces and Storeys, eight adults and five small children. Six of the adults were natives of Ireland.

In an old letter dated August 25, 1810, written by Leslie Patterson to his father-in-law, Joseph Backus, of Erie, he states, "We have a good crop of flax." So we see that no time was lost before the first operations of the linen industry began.

Truly it meant industry in more than one [illegible], from beginning to end of the process!

One hundred and twenty years ago the cotton industry in the Southern States was in its infancy. Machinery has been introduced that has resulted in the present low prices for cotton goods, which the poorest people can afford to pay. The cost of linen goods, then, was beyond the means of most of the settlers, so they were obliged to raise the flax and make their own linen cloth.

This was a long, tedious process, and even a summary of it, in the space at my disposal, will show why pure linen is still expensive and why adulterants and substitutes are often used.

Linen comes from the stalk of the flax plant. It is the fibre which lies between the inner, woody core and the outer bark. It is from 12 to 20 inches long, held together by a vegetable gum, and has the valuable qualities of *strength* and *lustre*.

It appears from the early accounts that settlers who came from Ireland, Great Britain and Germany understood the process best, while those from the New England States and Pennsylvania were more skilled in the woollen industry.

In the spring the flax seed was sown or planted rather thinly, as it would then spread out and produce more stalks. The plant has a blue flower and is ripe enough to pull when the stalks turn yellow two-thirds of the way down.

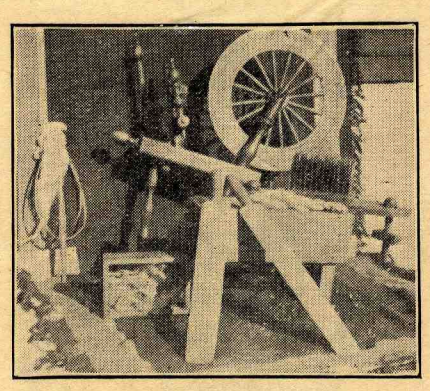
When it reached its growth it was carefully pulled by hand, one stalk at a time, that the fibre be not broken, then it was tied in small sheaves, which were set up to dry and to ripen the seeds. Then a sheaf was held in the left hand, and the seed balls beaten with a heavy stick till all the seeds dropped off.

After this the stalks of the flax were spread evenly on sod and left there from six to eight weeks, till the dew, rain and sun cured or rotted the pith and bark, after which the fibre could be separated. As soon as it was cured and on some fine, dry day it was put in the barn till winter, when they would break the stalks with long wooden knives set into a frame and hinged together with a wooden pin. The worker held a bunch of flax in his left hand, then he lifted the upper set of knives with his right hand, bringing them down with considerable force on the bunch of flax. This broke up the pith inside the fibre of the stalks, and was very hard work.

The next process was scutching. A board about four feet long was placed upright and nailed at the bottom to a heavy wooden block. The top end of the board was sharpened and a bunch of the broken flax was held upon this end with the left hand, while the worker dressed the flax with a long wooden sword or scutching knife, held in his right hand. Sometimes the flax was spread on the floor and two workers knelt, facing each other, and chopped with the wooden knives on the flax. These strokes of the swords or knives removed the loose pith. It was hard work and very unhealthy because of the dust.

The fibre was then shaken and drawn through the hackle or flax comb. This was a board about 8 inches by 4 inches, full of rows of long steel spikes. Bunches of the fibre were drawn through the hackle, which removed all the coarse fibre, which was called tow. What was left was a beautiful, soft, silky fibre which was spun and used for the finer linen goods.

A small wheel was used for spinning flax. It was kept in motion by a treadle worked by the foot while the worker was seated to spin. A bunch of flax was fastened to the distaff—a forked stick at



Relics of a Pioneer Industry.

Here we have a distaff, a flax wheel, a box of tow, a hackle or flaxcomb, a streak of flax, and a scutching knife.

the front end of the wheel, the flax was pulled off the distaff, attached to the spindle and spun out into linen thread, which was reeled and tied into bundles called hanks.

The coarse fibre or tow was spun and woven into various useful goods, bed-ticks, coarse towels, sheets and men's every-day shirts and trousers. They also made strings and ropes of it.

After the linen cloth came from the loom it was spread on the grass and sprinkled with water several times each day to bleach and shrink it. The cloth was very hard and stiff, and after being washed and before rinsing it was often folded together, placed over a block and pounded with a stick to soften up the goods. Two of the men or boys sometimes took each end of a long piece and shook and snapped it to help the softening process. Occasionally in their fun of jerking each other some damage was done to the cloth.

As time went on and the necessities in the way of bedding and clothing were supplied, and stores laid by for the future, they had more time for making finer articles—towels, supple and lustrous as a piece of heavy silk—and tablecloths which took a beautiful gloss when carefully ironed, and those were the days when things were *properly* ironed.

Windows—for which glass was unknown at first—were added as the homes improved, and lace curtains were knitted from the linen thread in patterns similar to the articles illustrated.

An examination of the finished articles fills one with surprise and admiration. One can hardly realize the laborious lives of those early pioneers. They did no fancywork in our sense of the term, but we are sure that they did try to excel in what they produced—something not only necessary, but also beautifully fine and permanent.

ANNA F. DOCKER.

Fanny (Backus) Docker

West Elgin 6

REQUIRES SKILL AND PATIENCE TO GET BEST YIELD FROM FLAX

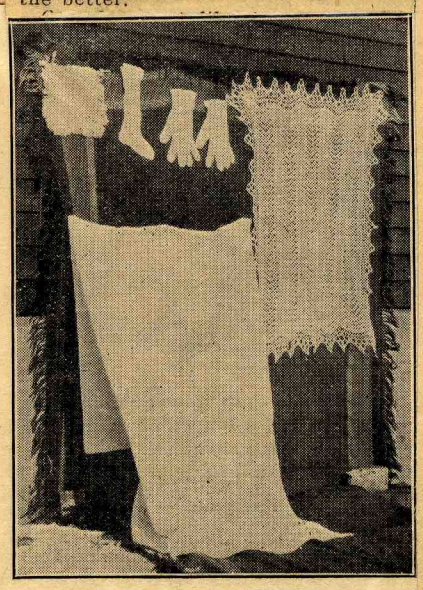
Many readers of the farmer's page are unaware that the flax industry is already of considerable importance in western Ontario. While there is no immediate prospect of the crop's assuming large proportions in this region, it is interesting to know that the crop has been produced within our environs with gratifying results. It must be kept in mind that this industry is a very ancient enterprise. Pharaoh robed Joseph in fine linen. The rich man in the New Testament was clad in purple and fine linen. No feast is complete unless the table set therefor is adorned with this matchless fabric. There have been substitutes for this exquisite cloth but good taste has decreed over and over again that linen fair and white has not its equal either for purposes of adornment or for utility.

Unfortunately for the industry, it has not been undertaken seriously in this part of the province. Were other crops handled as the linen crops have been handled they, too, would be giving scant and unsatisfactory returns.

While the climate of Belgium and of the British Isles, particularly the climate of Ireland with the fine variety of sunshine and showers, to say nothing of the prevailing humidity of the air, are ideal for flax production, splendid growth has been found in south Huron and from that region southerly in the province.

Must Get Rid of Weeds

Flax requires a soil that is clean and well cultivated. Too much care cannot be expended in getting rid of all weeds before flax seed is sown. The soil does not need to be over-rich but it must be clean. The surface of the land should be loose resting on a moist subsoil. The crop does well after oats or after pasture. But whatever the rotation, the land cannot be too free from weeds. It is in this particular that a great many farmers have failed. The land should be plowed in the autumn and worked to the limit to get it perfectly clean, if possible. In the spring it should be worked to a fine tilth and sown as early as any other crop should be sown. The seeding should be at the rate of from two to three bushels per acre. Thick seeding is required in order that the stalks may be induced to grow tall and thin. Forty inches is a satisfactory length of stalk though the longer the stalk the better.



After a Century of Use.

This collection shows a table cloth and various knitted articles made in Talbot Settlement, Elgin County.

One does not like to mention it, but when the flax is about two to three inches high it should be weeded by hand. Unfortunately, labor conditions in this province render this weeding process almost impossible. As the production is carried on on a small scale it is important that the best seed, the Dutch Blue, should be shown.. Some sow the seed in drills about six inches apart, though the prevailing method is to broadcast the seed for reasons already indicated.

Ripening the Seed

When the leaves have fallen from the lower part of the stem and the whole plant is a golden color the time has come for harvesting operations, though care must be exercised not to allow the plant to really ripen provided fibre is the main interest. When anxiety is present for the seed value the plants should be allowed to ripen as above described.

Harvesting is done in one of three ways. The first of these is to pull the plant by the roots keeping stalks of equal length together and keeping the stalks parallel. These bundles are bound very much as wheat sheaves used to be bound. The sheaves are then stooked and left to dry.

A second method is to harvest the flax as hay is harvested by a mower and hay rake. The flax is then allowed to lie on the ground till it is ready for the factory. This method means the loss of a good deal of seed, though it facilitates rolling. The third method is to cut the crop with a binder and care for it as wheat or oats are cared for till the time for taking the crop to the factory.

Seeds are removed from the stalks by running the seeded ends between two smoothrapidly-revolving rollers. This method insures the non-injury of the seeds. The seeds are then cleaned and sold for oil, for oil cakes and for other purposes.

Removing the Fibre

After the seeds have been removed, the practice in Ontario is to remove the stalks to a pasture field where they are spread out thinly and evenly till they are thoroughly rotted, enabling the rough hard surface of the fibre to be removed by a breaking machine. As far as quality of work is concerned no improvement has been found on this method. During seasons like the present, this rotting process is held up by the prevailing dry weather. In the older countries the rotting process is hastened by placing the flax on end in pits and turning in water. The water added must be pure an soft, containing the minimum of lime or of iron. When the flax is placed in pits, the utmost care in watching the process is scarcely sufficient for the production of a high-qualitied article.

Examination of a flax stalk shows the outside to be of a hard, fibrous nature. This is of little commercial value. Next to the rind is the poorer grade of fibre. This is separated from the fine fibre and is made into tow.

After the rotting, or retting, the flax is passed through the breaking machine, a process that breaks up the rind so that it may be removed. This breaking is done by passing the stalks between groved rollers that thoroughly crimp and loosen up the fibre. This, too, is a tedious process. While the fibrous rind is thus thoroughly broken, the valuable inside fibre remains unbroken and uninjured.

But even after this breaking stage a considerable portion of the rind still adheres to the important fibre. This is removed by passing the flax through a machine equipped with blade revolving at the rate of 250 revolutions per minute. This feeding is done by handfuls. When the fibre is clean it is packed in bales and sent to the spinner.

Cannot Be Hurried

Users of linen do well to remember that the manufactured fabric they prize so highly is the result of a deal of patient toil. There is something of a mystery about the best of linen that escapes the great majority of mankind. Here is an industry that seems to refuse to be hurried. While it is a fact that a great reward awaits the man who will invent machinery for the handling of the flax crop, so far the industry has fought shy of inventions. The industry is at least five thousand years old, yet it seems to do best when carried on by the small grower who has the craft to know the ways of this wonderful plant and who will give personal attention to every phase of its cultivation and care and development. The writer is here, of course, referring to the preparation of the plant for the spinner. Plant and grower seem to be almost one. The "catching on" of growing and of processing seem to be almost intuitive.

The coming of cotton interfered sadly with the industry. But no one who has really learned to know the value of linen ever thinks of comparing cotton with linen. The discovery of rayon gave this industry still another setback, but still linen has its own royal purposes.

Its production up to its being fitted for the spinner is very laborious involving a deal of strenuous labor and almost uncanny skill to get the highest results. Ontario people are not likely to have the patience to develop this industry to its highest point. But should they ever wake up to the advantages of this crop and undertake it in a reasonable spirit they will find themselves possessed of still another cash crop that will help to capture the elusive but necessary dollar. It looks as if the future of the production depends upon the invention of suitable machinery for its harvesting and weeding, as flax fits in admirably in a five-year rotation with pasture, wheat, oats and potatoes. Flax-growing is no industry for the careless weed - encouraging farmer, though many such farmers attempt to make money by undertaking it.

The ruins of Old Ashery, east of the sawmill on the Currie Road owned and operated by the Cusack Brothers, who with teams and waggons collected ashes from Dunwich farmers, and stored at this place where lye was drained from ashes and placed in kegs; for potash factory. The ashes were then moved away by the neighboring farmers and spread on land

Turning back the pages of history to the days of the potash kettles and home-made soap.

AMONG the many publications of an agricultural nature that find their way into my box at the local office is a small booklet which comes once a month from the American Potash Institute, Washington, D.C. As its name would indicate it is published in the interests of commercial farm fertilizers with particular emphasis on the use of potash. I have never been able to find out to whom I have been indebted all these years for the receipt of this little book. The latest issue contained some reference to the pioneer potash industry whereby the early settlers made themselves a little cash in the process of removing the trees from their land. This reference rang a little bell somewhere back in memories of the past.

Personally, I was born about two generations too late to be able to speak from first-hand experience on the early potash industry. However, one does not need to be a hundred years old to remember when every farm had the necessary equipment for at least a part of the process, which in my own memory was making home-made soap rather than potash for use as fertilizer.

Home-Made Soap

As nearly as I can recall the winter's supply of ashes from the stoves was placed in a large container with sufficient openings in the bottom to allow the water poured on top of the ashes to seep through below. The liquid that ran out was known as lye which was caught in a container for use later. I don't remember the process of making soap but I know that one of the extra duties at pig butchering time was removing all the fat from the intestines. It was then rendered and along with the lye placed in a kettle hung over an outdoor fire and the end product was softsoap, which was considered the last thing in perfection for special washing jobs. By further boiling, a hard soap was made which was cut into convenient sized cakes.

As already mentioned, the pioneer potash industry has long since gone out of existence. I do, however, remember an "ashery" in operation as late as about the time of the first World War. The owner went about in the spring gathering hardwood ashes wherever he could get them and for weeks the old "ashery" would steam like a maple syrup camp. What he did with the product I do not know. Personally, I alway felt that the proper place for ashes was back on the land from which they came and possibly the present great need of our soil, for commercial fertilizer, is partly due to the continued selling of crops without returning the natural mineral elements that were removed. As long as a new field was being taken into production each year we had no need for the addition of commercial fertilizer but with the last field cleared our mineral bank began to go dry.

Two Problems

When our pioneer ancestors settled in Ontario they were faced with two problems. They had to get the trees off the soil and they had to have a little revenue on which to live until they had land under production. This situation resulted in the birth of the pioneer potash industry. It seems hard to believe, in this generation of high priced hardwoods, that the great forests of maple and other hardwoods would be cut down and burned for the sake of their ashes. There were no two-man crosscut saws, as we know them, in those days and the work had to be done with the axe. However, I am told that once the tree was down, fires were kept burning along the length of the tree, at intervals suitable for making logs of proper length for hauling to a pile for burning. The ashes were then hauled to the local ashery of which there apparently was one in each village.

The Potash Kettle

What the process was in the making of potash I do not know but years after the industry ended there were hundreds of huge iron kettles scattered around the countryside, some of them several feet in diameter. They were used on farm for making maple syrup before the days of evaporators. Others were used in later years as water containers for livestock on pasture. They are becoming fewer as the years go by and though the name may not now be generally used they were in my own younger days known as potash kettles.

I am not sufficiently well informed as to where all the potash comes from that we spread on our farms today, in order to maintain some approach to the quantity of crops we grew in the past generation, but I do know that if all the ashes that were sold off the farms in those early days were available today there would be little need of spending money for that particular type of fertilizer. However, I don't think we should be too critical of our grandparents and great grandparents in this matter. They were indeed very fortunate in having something to sell for which there was a market and probably would have been foolish had they not taken advantage of it, especially when in doing so they were preparing their land for other purposes.

Talbot's Mill

Not completely destroyed by fire 1812-14 - Horse mill built by Talbot about 1805 - hard oak timbers survived - later moved near Iona for cutting wood & sawing timber - 5 teams - 5 arms from a centre wheel - oxen earlier - Upright tower affair at the cutting end of the horse mill was raised & lowered by hand as well as by horse power - Shown in map of Pt Burwell 1813 - Map Shows Talbot's home, Copper shop. Blacksmith shop several poultry houses near house; Mills. distillery. large warehouse & smaller buildings near mouth of Talbot Creek