

“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”

A Harvest Memoir

by *Elma L. Bamberg*
edited by *Virgil W. Dean*

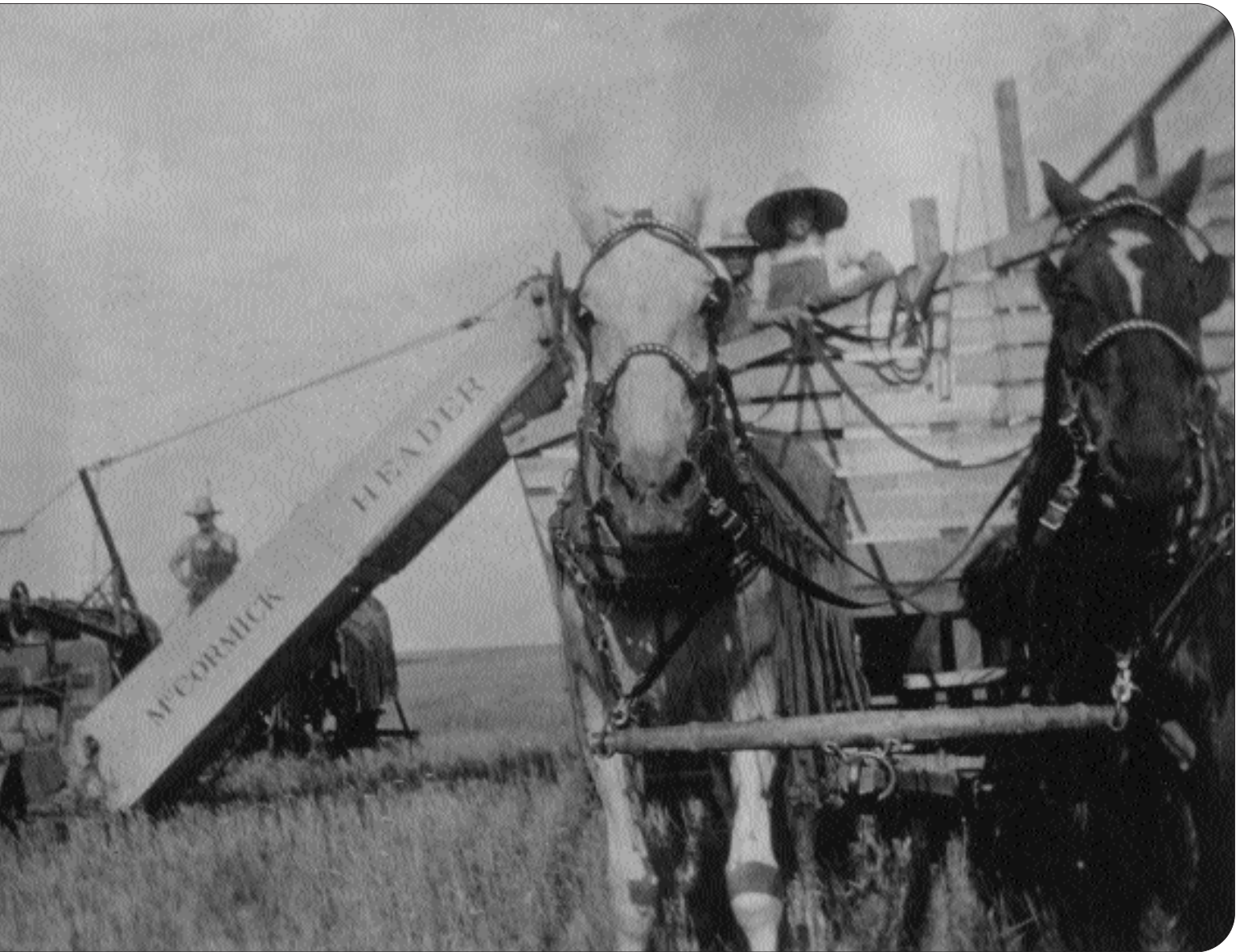
Harvest was an important and exciting time of year for Kansas’s 170,000 farm families at the turn of the last century. Everyone had her or his job to do, and upon this work depended the family’s livelihood. Little wonder that memories of these vital economic and cultural events, such as the one published here, often were recorded. They frequently offer considerable insight into the social dynamics of the family farm and shared labor in rural communities.¹

Elma L. Barnes was born on December 18, 1887, and grew up on her family’s southwest Ellis County farm. Her mother and father, Jennie Moore and Dora E. Barnes, raised their young family on a 160-acre wheat farm. They were surrounded by a good number of relatives, including Mrs. Barnes’s younger sister Lottie Moore Wilde (Aunt Lottie and Uncle Arthur in the following reminiscence). Elma Barnes played her part in the family en-

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1. Elma L. Bamberg, “My Home on the Smoky” (manuscript, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society). “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread,” 184–89, was chapter seventeen in Bamberg’s original manuscript, loaned to the Kansas State Historical Society for filming by Arlene B. French in 1974. For other excellent examples of harvest memoirs, see Solomon L. Loewen, “Harvesting in Kansas During the Early Decades of This Century: A Reminiscence,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 13 (Summer 1990): 82–87; H. Roger Grant, ed., “‘In the Land of My Dreams’:





The header box, just behind the horses, is where Elma Bamberg fondly recalls riding during one early harvest in southwest Ellis County. This photo is of an unidentified Ellis County wheat field around the turn of the century.

terprise until they moved to Hays sometime before the end of the century. There in 1908 she married Albert E. Bamberg. The following reminiscence is one chapter from a 209-page memoir written shortly before her death in 1968.²

Reminiscences of Graydon Horath, Farm Laborer in Kansas," *ibid.* 16 (Winter 1993–1994): 248–61.

2. The manuscript is undated but references by the author to the "cold war" and the "war on poverty" leads one to conclude that it most likely was written between 1964 and 1968. Elma Bamberg died in Dear-

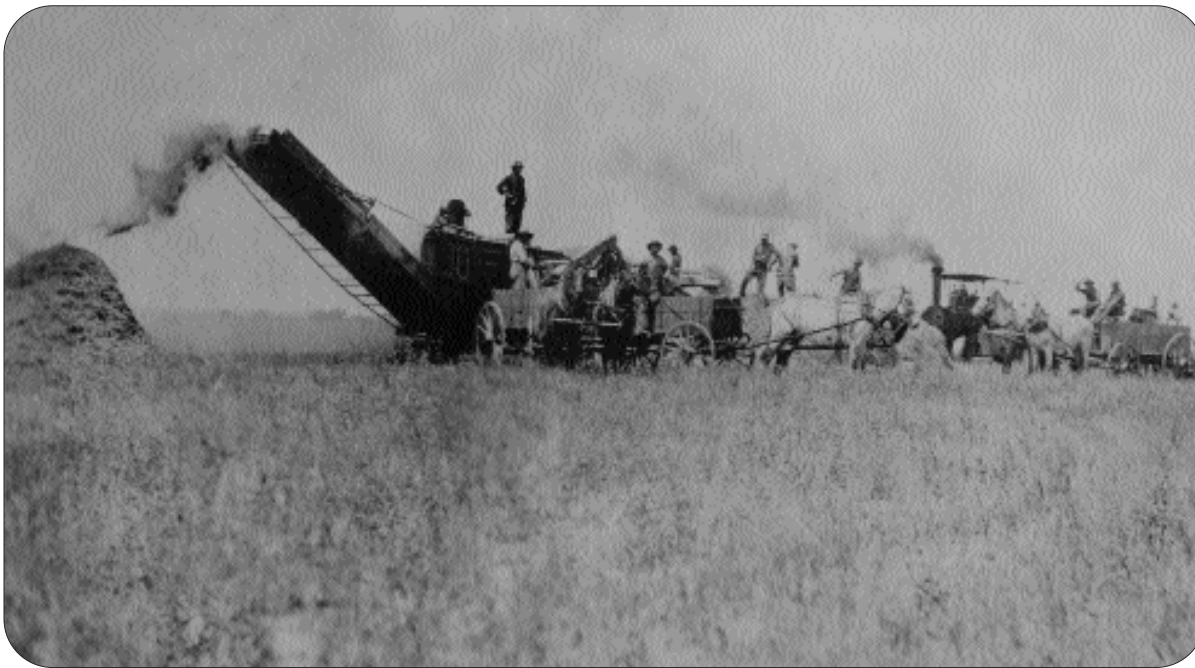
This is a delightful story of harvest time life and gender roles on a western Kansas farm more than a century ago. Elma Bamberg's relatively brief account actually says a great deal about the changes that have affected wheat farming during the twentieth century, both technologically and culturally.

born, Michigan, on July 25, 1968. It appears that she wrote the manuscript in longhand and that it was subsequently typed by someone else after her death. All that survives is the typescript, and the editor has changed only those things that appear to be typographical errors.

All over Lookout Township and Ellis County wheat was waving its golden heads in the same rhythm as the silver waves of the sea. It was nearing the middle of the nineties, in the middle of a fairly new country. To some it was the gay nineties, and to those who lost crops or had crop failures it was the gray nineties.³ In Lookout it seemed that everyone had wheat, as it billowed

yellow gold waved at the blue sky above. So bright, it hurt your eyes, but it made your heart glad. Most pioneers had memories of being hungry, so it never occurred [*sic*] to anyone that there could ever be too much wheat.⁵

But there it was: Tyler had wheat, Chase's had wheat, Wilde's had wheat, lots of wheat. Scott's had wheat, Higgin's had wheat, all the Moore families had wheat, Swiers'



Everybody had "lots of wheat," Bamberg remembers. This threshing scene in early Ellis County illustrates one such bountiful harvest.

and waved at the distant horizon. It looked like the earth was breathing and flexing her muscles, really working hard to bring forth a big crop.

As the land had been broken and the acres put into production wheat became the popular crop. Other crops had been tried, but more and more farmers turned to wheat. As far as the eye could see it seemed you could see the favored crop.⁴ The sun was especially bright and the

3. The 1890s was indeed a "gray" decade for many Kansans. The nation suffered through a severe depression, the Plains were rocked by the Populist revolt, and many individuals and families struggled to survive. Although things were even worse farther west, Ellis County's population actually declined during the middle years of the decade before rebounding in 1899 and 1900. Lookout Township remained relatively stable with between 350 and 400 inhabitants. See Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Eighth Biennial Report, 1891-1892* (Topeka: State Printer, 1893); *ibid.*, *Tenth Biennial Report, 1895-1896* (1896); *ibid.*, *Twelfth Biennial Report, 1899-1900* (1901).

4. According to the *Biennial Report of the State Board of Agriculture* for 1895, Ellis County farmers planted 105,259 acres of winter wheat from which they harvested 421,036 bushels. By 1899 they had topped a million bushels, and in 1900 they reaped an amazing 2,339,149 bushels of winter wheat from 137,597 acres. (The entire state produced 76,595,443 bushels on 4,268,704 acres in 1900, the largest wheat crop to that date.) Corn was

Johnson's McDonald's, Stadder's, Post's, Feitz's, Gatewood's, Freshour's Bemis's had wheat, in fact everywhere you looked wheat was waving its heavy bearded heads at the Sun. But I was better acquainted with the small wheat field at Father's, and I watched one bigger field at Uncle Arthur's, too.⁶

The men were repairing and putting all the harvesting equipment in order and watching for hail storms, though they were helpless to do anything about them, except to harvest as soon as wheat was ready. The women were

still Kansas's number one crop, but winter wheat reigned in most central and western counties and would become dominant statewide during the second decade of the twentieth century.

5. Actually, it had occurred to one Mary Elizabeth Lease as early as 1891, when she reportedly encouraged farmers to "raise less wheat and corn, but more hell" (emphasis added). See *Newton Kansan*, July 16, 1891.

6. "Uncle Arthur" appears to have been Arthur W. Wilde. He operated a much larger eight-hundred-acre farm, and in 1895 planted 340 acres of winter wheat, whereas his brother-in-law Dora Barnes had only 50 acres. Many of the families mentioned by Mrs. Bamberg can be found in the 1895 census and indeed they all did grow wheat; of those, Peter Johnson seems to have been the largest wheat grower. The census indicated that he planted 525 acres of winter wheat on his 720-acre farm. See Kansas State Census, 1895, Ellis County, Lookout Township.

planning on the big groups they would have to feed. Most of them were sure there would be plenty of milk; the meat product was planned for since the previous cold months when it had been butchered and cured or stored in five or ten gallon crocks in lard. Enough chickens had to be planned for months ahead, both for eggs and for meat to feed the 'hands'. Gardens were planted early as possible in the Spring, so they could have vegetables to set the table. Potatoes, though they were not fully matured could be dug and used, though it took a lot of hills to make a meal and a lot of scraping to prepare them. At harvest time full cases of canned goods would be bought and had on hand. Great stocks of sugar, molasses, dried fruits were bought and ready for use. So the woman's part was not so easy, but with foresight it was done year after year. Most of the farmer's wives spoke for a girl to help. School girls from town made it an annual practice to go help in harvest, in the farm wives' kitchens. It was an experience for the city girls and it meant some spending money as well.

Two Uncles helped us cut our crop, so we went to help the uncles. At Uncle Arthur's I had my first ride in a header box. I wanted to know what the boys did as their part in the harvest fields. So one year I got my wish and permission to ride in a header box and help pitch wheat. I found that it was an exciting job; also that one had to be alert or get buried in wheat. A header box had to have two to operate it; one to drive the team and one to spread the fast coming wheat. Wheat heads had beards that pricked and stabbed. The header or wheat cutter took four horses to pull [*sic*] and cut.⁷ It kept the driver of these four horses busy guiding and driving. He stood on a small platform astraddle a stick or lever and by leaning his body to the right or left he could turn the header to the right or left. It took a lot of twisting and driving and talk-

7. Because headers are *pushed*, not pulled, probably the typist and not Elma Bamberg inadvertently introduced an error into the text. Binders, which are pulled, cut and automatically tied the grain into sheaves with twine or wire; these sheaves or bundles then had to be placed in shocks and subsequently hauled to the thresher. Headers cut the wheat much closer to the head (took only eight to ten inches of stalk) and conveyed the grain to a header wagon or barge ("box"), which hauled it to the stack for threshing. See Kirby Brumfield, *The Wheat Album: A Picture and Story Scrap Book of Wheat Harvests in Years Gone By* (Seattle: Superior Publishing Co., 1974), 81-84; R. Douglas Hurt, *American Farm Tools from Hand-Power to Steam-Power* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1982), 49-56.

ing to the horses to make everything work smoothly together. Horses got their signals from the driver's lines or reins, too. But just as soon as I paused to watch the header and how it worked I was being covered up with freshly cut wheat. Horses soon learned the meaning of 'gee' 'haw' 'gad up' and of course their names. The driver of the header had to be an artist or an expert with his bull whip. He never



The women planned on big groups of harvest hands to feed and tended to chickens, gardens, and butchering to ensure plentiful servings. Photo taken in Sherman County.

touched his horses, but he communicated with them with it. He'd give a command and punctuate it with the whip.

The header had long blades that cut back and forth, like a moving [mowing] machine, only much bigger. This fell on the conveyer which took it to the elevator to be escalated to the header box. The driver of the header had an exacting job to drive straight and make proper connections of the path of the former cut and to keep in proper position for the header box.

There were some irritating things to contend with while riding in the header box and trying to keep from being buried in wheat. There were grasshoppers by the thousands, even in the years they were not considered to be a plague. I learned why the harvester[s] tied bandana handkerchiefs around their necks. It was to keep wheat beards and grasshoppers from getting down their necks. They got into my sunbonnet and down my neck and crawled up my legs. The men got grasshoppers up their overall legs and would dance till they could capture the

pests and squeeze them hard, then shake the dead things out of their pant legs.

One other curious insect, but not too numerous, was what was called the Devils Darning Needle. It was from two to three inches long and very little larger in the body than a large darning needle. He crawled slowly; he didn't need to hurry, because he had a good protective coloring



During harvest Elma Bamberg usually turned her attentions from the wheat fields to "a girl's real duties," which meant helping Aunt Lottie in the garden, digging potatoes and picking vegetables. Photo taken in Sherman County.

and so he was very hard to see. He looked much like a quiet wheat straw. He had six legs. His front ones were short, the back pair was very long. About the only way he differed in appearance from a real darning needle was that he had two eyes, instead of one. These curious insects were never considered to be a pest and we rather liked him and guarded him. We considered him to be a curiosity and of interest, not a nuisance. He wasn't the pest that the grasshoppers were. They didn't crawl down necks, or in sunbonnets or up pant legs like the detested grasshopper did. He just sat like a bent wheat straw and didn't bother anyone. His method of self protection was to be very quiet.⁸

8. Although the phrase "Devil's Darning Needle" is often applied to dragonflies, it refers in this case to an insect of the family Phasmidae,

When the header box was filled, the header stopped. While the filled header box drove away toward the stack location and a fresh empty one drove into position, all hands took a drink out of their water jugs. Each header box and the header carried a jug of water. These jugs were covered with a generous packing of gunny sacks that served as insulation and cooling, as they tried to keep them wet.

With the wind blowing on them it was surprising how much it helped. After the drink and a new box they took off to fill the next one.

Wheat was piled in pairs of stacks, and left where a threshing outfit could easily get to it. Ravines and draws would be avoided, as a traction engine was limited in where it could run. Usually wheat stacks ran north and south, as it weathered the winds and rains better that way. Some wheat owners covered these stacks with canvas, but most were only weighed down with some wire with rocks wired to the ends and this all helped to retain the wheat in stacks and avoid wind lose [sic], until all could be threshed.

After turning my attention from the wheat cutting, I was back to a girl's real duties. Back into Aunt Lottie's kitchen, or out in the garden. The first potatoes dug in harvest time were not fully matured and it took a lot of time to prepare them. It took the best of one forenoon to harvest enough small potatoes and peas for one huge vegetable dish. The housewife usually was baking bread, making pies and cakes. She also had lots of milk to care for. At Aunt Lottie's there were 24 cows to be milked twice a day. All this had to be strained, put in cans or crocks and the milk from the day before had to be skimmed, or maybe there was a churning to be done. In that event, I usually did the churning as Carl was getting old enough to be working a little in the field.⁹ The

specifically the *Diaperomera femorata*—more commonly known as a walking stick. For another literary reference to the same insect, see Percy G. Ebbutt, *Emigrant Life in Kansas* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1886), 36.

9. Carl, who was six years old in 1895, was Elma's younger brother. By 1902 she would be the oldest of five siblings: Carl W., Reba L., Laura M., and Arlene. See Kansas State Census, 1895, Ellis County, Lookout Township; *ibid.*, 1910, Ellis County, Hays.

churnings at Aunt Lottie's were much bigger than for a smaller family. But someone had to go often to town to deliver the excess cream to the creamery. It took all of one man's time to take care of the milk cows and make the trips to town. So with a hired man or two, and the two harvesting crews, plus Aunt Lottie's family, plus the Barnes family, there were a lot of mouths to feed.

plain water. How the food did disappear; We, the cooks and the children wondered if we would have anything left for our hungry stomachs.

The raising of wheat got to be big business so fast that the old method of binding was outmoded in the bigger farms and faster equipment was necessary. In other parts of the State the binder was still in use, but their farms were



Eventually raising wheat "got to be such a big business" that the old method of binding was replaced by faster equipment. This binding scene is in Ellis County around 1900.

It was a mad race every year to get the wheat in the stacks before a hail storm caught up. Hail storms made frequent appearances every harvest time at scattered points. Many farmers were hailed out just as they were ready to cut their wheat. Every wheat grower kept close watch in a field to see when it was just right for cutting, and some cut too soon to avoid the hazard of losing their crop. A hail storm was capable of driving whole fields of wheat into the ground which had given it such a good growth.

At meal time the men were fed first; the children and the cooks had to wait. Someone had to wait on the table and keep water glasses filled and plenty of bread and butter on the table. Pies, had to be cut and served. Sometimes for a real treat Aunt Lottie served lemonade. Uncle Arthur believed that lemonade quenched the thirst more than

smaller. This was the era of change and bigger and better ways were being used to get a big job done before the elements could intervene.¹⁰



10. Despite the many technological changes that impacted wheat farms and farm families in the twentieth century, the farmer's crop is still at the mercy of the weather. Indeed, farmers became even more vulnerable to losses from hail when they began using the combine instead of the binder and header, since the grain must be "dead" ripe before combining; when cut with the older methods, it could be allowed to cure more in the shock or stack before threshing.

Elma Bamberg's observations about late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century change on the farm and the emergence of what some have called a "commodity culture" also are quite perceptive. As another memoirist, Solomon L. Loewen, wrote: "This was also the time when the combine made their appearance on the farm. This introduced an entirely new life-style on the farm. Harvesting became an individual family affair, not the enlarged family and community activity it used to be. The change was evident in the kitchen as well as in the field, a type of emancipation." See Loewen, "Harvesting in Kansas," 87.