PENNSYLVANIA BARN RAISING
Merton Mealy

The farm owner has always taken great pride in his cattle, horses, house, and especially his barn, because it was a sign of his success or failure. His house, while it was comfortable, was not ornamental in the early days as it was built of logs. Later, as his family grew, additions were made and it only awaited the time when, after a new barn had been built, he would get around to a new one, for he knew that if he cared for his crops, live stock, and cleared additional acres, a good barn would be necessary and his house would come later.

The time when the new barn could be built was eagerly awaited and was planned for a couple of years in advance. It was almost always (when a slight hill or grade permitted) of a design known as a bank barn. This design, by filling in the approach to the second floor, gave access to threshing floor, granary and hay loft. The ground floor, which was warmer, housed his horses, cattle, and other live stock and gave access to a cellar and cistern under the filled-in approach to the threshing floor. The prevailing practice was to have a shed the full width of the barn ten or more feet in width. In the early history of Pennsylvania, until saw and planing mills could be built and brick yards could produce, barns were built of logs and were generally small and farmers resorted to barracks to protect their crops. Sometimes the platform was erected several feet off the ground, high enough for cattle and other live stock to find shelter under it. On this platform hay, grain, or straw was placed which otherwise could not be housed; then four posts which had holes were set up and pegs to support the roof were bored through the posts. The roof was then adjusted according to the contents. This was an emergency structure and was in use for only a short time until the landowner could build a barn

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Illustrations drawn to Mr. Mealy's specifications by his son, N. H. Mealy, design engineer, of Warren, Ohio.
such as we are attempting to describe. When brick became available some barns in the eastern part of Pennsylvania had brick ends and timber frames, and the ends were ornamented with hour glass, sheaf of wheat, diamond, wine glass, and star designs for ornamentation and ventilation. Barns in western Pennsylvania were of timber frame design covered by boards and with shingle roof, since timber was plentiful, up until about twenty-five or thirty years ago when such timber was almost impossible to procure.

Against the time of its building the farmer made all necessary preparations. He selected, cut down, and hauled (generally during the winter season) large trees on his wood lot to a nearby saw mill where they were cut up into boards for siding, sheeting, also four-by-fours for braces. This material was hauled to the site and carefully piled up to dry.

The next step was the selection of a carpenter and stone mason, for these barns required a good, enduring foundation and the fact that they stand today is a mute testimonial to the skill and honest, hard work of their builders who took great pride in their work. The stone mason, after consulting with the boss carpenter, went into the fields and selected suitable stones and split them into the required size by means of wedges driven into cavities formed in a straight line by use of a stone mason's pick. The wedges were struck a blow at a time with a steel sledge hammer until the stone split. They were dressed to size after being hauled to the barn site on stone boats, as they were called. At the present time this method would be thought obsolete and too expensive and poured concrete would take its place, but these old foundations were as enduring as time itself and concrete is not always so.

In that section of Forest County where the author grew up the names of two men stand out—stone masons who could be depended upon to do an excellent job of mason work. They were Reuben Kline and Charles Korb. The name of the one man who seemed to be the favored one to build the timbered frame barns was Philip Wolfe, an apprentice of William Hepler, early settler and master carpenter.

Mr. Wolfe's later years were spent on what was his father's farm, which he had acquired, located in Forest County about two miles from Newmansville. In 1924 he built a large bank barn on this farm. On the day of the raising over one hundred men (not
counting women or children) were present. During Mr. Wolfe's lifetime he built one hundred and fourteen barns, not counting other structures. His first was built in the Red Brush community in 1891 and his last was built on what was his grandfather's (Philip Wolfe's) farm in 1934.

To the boss carpenter was left all the minute details of the building. He took into the farmer's wood lot a helper or two and they selected, cut down and hewed the trees which would go into the timbers of the frame. A chalk line was struck on two sides of the downed trees and an ax man stood on and scored the timber to the line. The boss carpenter was the one who now wielded the broadax (an ax with a blade a foot in width with an offset handle) for he knew how important a square, well-hewn timber was. The timber was then turned over and the other two sides treated the same way. Rafters of straight, second growth pine (if procurable) were cut, peeled and made ready, and they, together with the hewn timbers, were taken to the site of the barn. Now came the job of preparing the timbers for their individual place in the frame. They were cut to exact length, mortice and tenon formed, holes bored for pins to hold tenon and mortice together, and the day selected found everything ready for the raising. The boss carpenter had all the necessary tools, such as boring machine, chisels, saws, mauls, ax and broadax and a pike pole, a very necessary implement without which it was scarcely possible to raise a frame. It was necessary to have pike poles of different lengths, some as long as twenty feet, made of straight second growth pine with a sharpened metal pike in the small end. These were used to raise a section of the frame, or bents as they were called, to an upright position.

Unless the family had grown daughters some neighbor women came in the day before the raising to help prepare the immense amount of food required to feed the thirty or more men necessary for the raising. Not only was food provided for the mid-day meal but also for the evening meal as well, for these men were never allowed to go home hungry. The women prepared chicken, dressing and gravy for the huge bowls of mashed potatoes, corn, cabbage or sauerkraut; also pies of several kinds and cake. From the cellar came jelly, preserves, marmalade, beets and cucumber pickles. From storage was brought the one item of food the farmer
best knew how to prepare, delicious smoked ham, served on this occasion in generous quantities. An improvised table made of planks supported by sawhorses and seats of planks on nail kegs were set up outside the house. Neighbor women were not slow in helping out on this occasion and brought much food.

The men came early and began the job of putting the lower or foundation frame together, after which planks were laid for the men to walk on and the hazardous task of raising the entire frame was begun. An outside section was put together and then raised and held in an upright position while another section was raised and the two joined together with horizontal beams. To me the most amazing thing was the way the carpenter could frame up a barn, the exact number of its pieces required, their length, where mortice and tenon belonged, without the faintest resemblance of a prepared plan or blue print. Everything seemed to go together as if it belonged and if a mistake was made no one ever knew it. Thus the work progressed and evening found the job complete, even rafters in place. The men, tired but ready for another meal before going home, were conscious of a job well done. There never seemed to be any shortage of men for a barn raising as they knew many were required and they thoroughly enjoyed getting together and talking over current events and happenings in their neighborhood just as much as their wives did, so they were ever ready to lend a hand.

The days of these old time barn raisings are gone as frames now are made up of plank a couple of inches thick and six to eight or more in width, spiked together. The social aspect of these gatherings is still carried on in church, grange, and in many other activities.