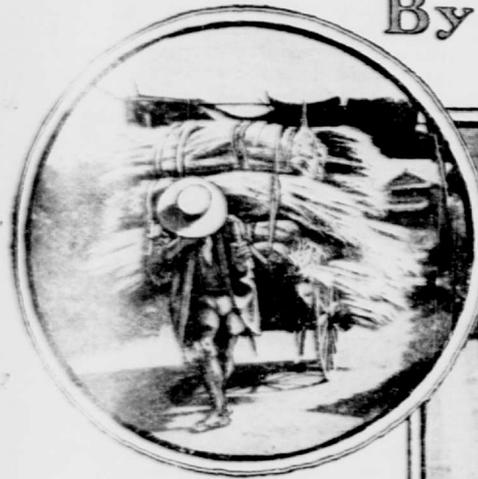


# MAKING MATTING IN JAPAN

By James French Dorrance



Bringing in the Reeds

THE average American, asked to name our most common importation from Japan, in answering like'y would waver between three products—silks, paper napkins and matting. The last comes near being the correct answer, for vastly more American feet tread on Japanese matting than wear Japanese silks, and of course paper napkins with their curious decorations are beyond serious consideration.

Preparing Warps for the Loom

It is curious that the industry to which we have taken so kindly should be the one in which the clever, inventive Japs have found little or no chance of introducing modern manufacturing methods.

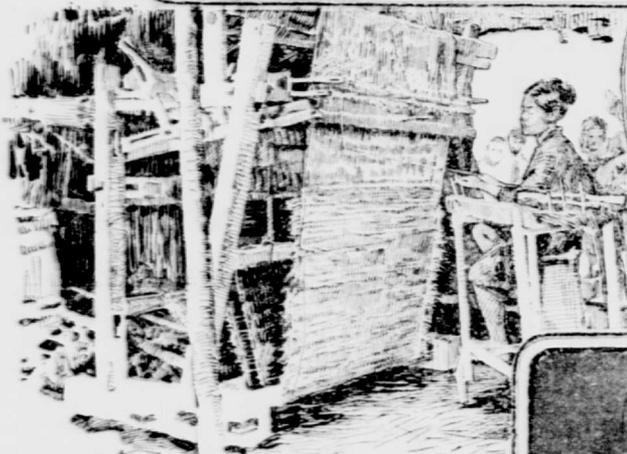
Matting still is woven by hand, with endless toil, on the most primitive looms, as it was in the feudal era of thirty or forty years ago when the Samurai and their swords ruled the land.

Strange it is, too, that of all the things we get from Japan it is matting that is most affected, proportionately, by the dogs of war which are trailing their chains through the Far East. The men of the matters' guild have put on their war togs and marched into the ranks of the Second and Third Army Corps, or, if not fit for "august" soldiers, they have become "honorable" burden-bearers. The women and children, left behind, are striving to keep on at the looms in the clatter of which they are born, and at which, likely as not, they die. But there is none to till and harvest the marshes of reeds, and the villages soon get the finished product to market, the way being too long and the load too heavy for them. So, matting prices are on a war footing, and already there has been an advance of ten to fifteen per cent, in the wholesale quotations on all grades. Further advances are expected as the war continues.

We have learned to put Japanese matting to a number of uses, other than the original one of covering our floors. It is popular for up-bolstering furniture for summer cottages. Thousands of rolls of it annually are made into waste-paper baskets. The fancy designs are much in demand for wall coverings and wainscotings. In one way and another the American market finds a use for six hundred fifty thousand rolls each year, and if Japan does not produce it we must do without, for the Chinese matting is so lacking in artistic touches that it hardly can be substituted.

The tourist who goes to Japan is too busy with temples and tea-houses and geishas to find time to visit the matting villages, which are found in every direction for several hundred miles back from Kobe. There are hundreds of vil-

lages within a three hundred-mile radius of this seaport, the inhabitants of which make their mean living solely from the product of their matting looms. The roads from village to village usually are in an almost impassable



A Typical Village Loom



Hauling Matting to Market



The Village Dyer at Work



A Factory at Okayama

condition, there are no hotels or inns at which a foreigner can obtain accommodation, and there hardly is an English-speaking person in the district, except a handful of missionaries. It is no

great wonder, then, that the tourist is content with a visit to the matting warehouses on the Kobe front and inquires not into the manner of its making.

The great American buyer, who like his brother the American drummer goes into the farthest corners of the earth, knows the matting country, however, even to its most isolated village, and his visits have made him familiar with every detail of this interesting industry. Each wholesale house takes the entire output of a certain group of villages, and that the product may be kept up to the required standard a representative of the house, usually an energetic, tireless, keen-sighted young American or Englishman, visits each village once or twice a year. The matting-makers know from this that they are watched and that inferior workmanship will not be tolerated.

The buyer's agent sets out from Kobe with a considerable retinue. He rides in a jinrikisha, of course, and behind him comes a coolie or two with hampers filled with the delicacies which make a native meal possible to an American. Then, he must have an interpreter, and perhaps a burden-bearer to carry rolls of wall-paper and squares of carpet.

Just what he wants with wall-paper and carpet bits on a round of the matting villages may need explanation. He will return without a scrap of paper or a thread of carpet; but half a hundred looms will be at work on new patterns. While the Japanese are the most artistic of matting-makers, their ideas of art run too strongly toward the grotesque and horrible to make their product available in an American department store. If left to their own devices they would send over endless rolls of dragons and crawling snakes and fierce beasts, the like of which exist only in their distorted fancies. Their artistic fingers have to be directed, and the latest wall-paper and carpet designs make most satisfactory patterns.

Twenty miles back from Kobe one comes into a region of marshes in which the matting-reeds are grown. The appearance of these marshy fields is not unlike that of the cotton-fields in the South before the bolls have burst. The reeds bear no grain, and may be utilized only for matting purposes. They must be cultivated constantly, though planting is unnecessary, as the reeds, when ripe, drop seeds for reproducing the crop.

The reeds are cut by hand by the men of the village. Children from eight to fourteen follow the mowers and bind the crop into rough sheaves.

The typical matting village is found half-hidden in a grove near a reed-field. It consists of a score or more of one-story huts with sharp, thatched roofs, which have the characteristic Japanese sweep and overhanging eaves. The walls are giddily painted in purple, chrome-yellow and other bright colors. Some of the more pretentious huts boast roofs of blue tiles, or at least an awning of them.

One enters the village, perhaps at the side of a coolie who is hauling reeds in from the field. He is between the shafts of a two-wheeled cart on which an enormous load is piled. He wears a wide straw hat, a flowing robe and short trousers. From his knees down his legs are bare, and there is a fine display of knotted muscles under his brown skin as he tugs at his heavy load.

One follows this human horse up the irregular main street to the hut of the village dyer. His establishment easily is distinguished by the long poles of freshly dyed reeds which are strung on bamboo poles along the roadway on either side of the hut. His knowledge of dye mixing has come to him from his father or elder brother, and he guards it as an inventor does his soul's secret.

A baked clay pot, over a crudely-built fireplace