

## IN DUGOUTS AND SOD HOUSES

*By Veda Giezentanner\**

Hope of a better life led settlers to each land opening. Those who were fortunate enough to obtain a homestead had many hardships ahead before their hopes became reality.<sup>1</sup>

In temporary shelters the women began to make homes. These might consist of the wagon box set on the ground, only a brush roof supported by the boxes and barrels of their possessions or even a tent made of two sheets which soon blew away in the wind on the flat, almost treeless prairie. Some families shared one large tent pitched on the corners where the farms joined. In this way the head of the family could eat and sleep in the area which was on his land. But these shelters did not last long for the men began immediately to prove their claims. This included making improvements, and what could be more proof of intention to stay than a permanent home.

Because there was no lumber available and little money to buy it, if it had been near, the homesteader had to find a plentiful and cheap substitute. The land provided what was needed. An excavation was begun into the side of a hill, ravine, creek or slope facing south if possible. This was to become the dugout home for years to come. If well-built, this house would last for several years with little major maintenance. Earth was removed until the hole was the proper size. The size varied from eight to fourteen feet front to back and side to side, depending upon the length of the rail to be used for the ridge pole. Two stout poles were driven into the front for the doorfacing. Small logs or boards were fastened to the poles. Then the earth which had been removed was packed against this. Some dugouts had the front opening closed with

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\* This article was produced during 1960 as a paper in a research project for an Oklahoma history class at the University of Oklahoma, taught by Dr. A. M. Gibson. Veda Giezentanner is the wife of the University Business Manager, Dud Giezentanner. She is a housewife and mother of three children, and descended from a pioneer family in Western Oklahoma. Her paper presented here is based largely on interviews with people who settled in this region.—Ed.

<sup>1</sup> The most helpful and interesting source of reference material used in the preparation of this article was in the information contained in the collection of interviews with people who lived in Oklahoma in early days of settlement, found in "Indian and Pioneer Papers," Phillips Collection, Library of The University of Oklahoma (Norman); Vol. 12, pp. 65-70, 77-78; Vol. 21, pp. 344-347; Vol. 23, p. 49; Vol. 35, pp. 345, 253, 261-262, 284-285; Vol. 41, pp. 257-258, 263, 267-272; Vol. 43, pp. 64, 69, 84-85, 91-93, 106, 114-118; Vol. 44, pp. 306-310; Vol. 48, p. 48; Vol. 58, pp. 449; Vol. 62, pp. 5-9; Vol. 77, pp. 57-59, 78, 82-92; Vol. 92, pp. 320.

pieces of sod. If there was to be a window, the framing was put in place as the time came. The roof was supported by a long pole placed across the top in the center of the structure. This was held in place by notched poles or simply fastened to the wall. Small logs, bushes or boards were nailed to the ridge pole. Then came grass and sod with earth packed between the pieces to fill the cracks. Especially at first before the grass had time to grow and hold the filler, the earth had to be replaced after each rain. Built in a natural runway for water the dugout often filled with water during a heavy rain. To keep the house dry inside, a trench was dug from the doorway to lower ground for drainage.

The doors were constructed of strips of wood nailed to two posts, one of which was purposely left long, to be inserted in holes drilled in the top and bottom of the opening. This allowed the door to swing as if it were on a hinge. The fastening might be nothing more than a strap of leather or rope. Locks were seldom used. At night a stout bar might be braced across the door. At other times the door would be nothing more than a quilt or skin. Windows were covered with a number of things. Oiled paper was the substitute for glass, letting in some light and keeping out cold and bugs. Cheese cloth was used for screening. Over this, some settlers used shutters constructed like doors; or again the closing might be a piece of canvas or an animal skin.

Sod houses were built of bricks of sod cut with a special plow. A piece of ground where the sod was thickest would be chosen and the plow would turn a furrow cutting through under the thick, tough roots of the prairie grass. For use in buildings, the furrows were carefully cut into strips four to eight inches thick and twelve to eighteen inches wide. These strips were then cut with a spade into blocks the desired length. Those to be laid lengthwise were usually three feet. The ones to be laid crosswise had to be cut twice the width of the other bricks. The average size of the sod house was sixteen by twenty feet. The pieces of sod were laid side by side in two rows around the outline of the house, leaving open the area for the doorway. The next row was laid on the first row, offsetting the joints. Every third or fourth row was laid crosswise to bind and strengthen the wall. The framing for the door and windows was placed in the proper space as construction progressed. The roof construction was the same as for the dugout.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The following journals, letters and personal accounts in the Manuscripts Division, Library of The University of Oklahoma (Norman) give an excellent picture of all phases of life on the prairie, especially at the time of the land openings in Oklahoma; G. D. Borlum Collection; May Choate Collection; Mrs. S. F. Ducum Collection; Mrs. Edna Hatfield Collection; Ann Brisky Hertzog Collection; Anna Hollem Collection; Mrs. W. S. Jarboe Collection; Harry Parker Collection; S. P. Ross Collection; also in *Clinton Daily News*. "History of Custer and Washita Counties," 1883-1937 (1937).

The half dugout was a combination of the dugout and the sod house, providing the answer for the homesteader who did not have a bank steep enough for the true dugout or who did not wish to spend time in building a sod house. The lower part was a dugout and the upper part was of sod.

The floors of these dwellings were packed earth. At the end of a month the floor was almost as smooth and as hard as oak. It could be swept and even mopped. Rugs, made of rags and braided by the homemaker, covered many of these. Wooden floors were rarely seen unless the house was built over a cellar. When floors were necessary, green wood was often used and as it warped easily, the floors were seldom even. This created more problems for the homemaker. An uneven floor might cause falls, and the cracks did let in wind. With the wind came dust and cold, making it difficult to keep the home clean and warm.

The inside walls of the homes were finished in many ways. Some were evened with an ax or shovel until they were smooth enough to be plastered with a mixture of clay and ashes. White-wash, applied to this smooth finish, lightened the dark interior and made the rooms more cheerful. Some people papered the walls with any available material, advertisements, pages of catalogs, newspapers and in a few cases even personal letters. Muslin and canvas covered some walls and ceilings to catch dirt that might fall from the roof onto the table, bed and other furnishings. Partitions were blankets or canvas tacked to the ridge pole, or roof supports.

The amount of water which leaked in during wet weather depended upon the skill of the builder. Many times it was necessary to dry all articles in the home after a rain. One woman told of cooking pancakes for her family while a child held an umbrella over her.<sup>3</sup>

These earth homes were cool in summer and easy to heat in winter. Fireplaces, built of sod, would not burn and served for heating and cooking. In some cases there might be a stove. The most common type was the "Topsy stove," a metal box with two holes on top, covered with lids. These openings allowed the fuel to be placed inside and the lids, replaced, held the cooking utensils. The oven was in the stove pipe. The temperature was controlled by the amount of fuel used in the stove. The stove pipe was a land-

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<sup>3</sup> These interviews were helpful sources of material about the day to day happenings of the dugout and sod house period in preparing this article: Homer A. Brown, Marlow, Okla. (Feb. and Mar., 1960); Mrs. Homer A. Brown, Marlow, Okla., (Feb. and Mar. 1960); Mrs. Loie Brown; Custer, Okla., (Apr. 8, 1960); William F. Brown, Marlow, Okla., (1950-1957); Frank Graves, Custer, Okla. (Apr. 8, 1960); Mrs. Orvil Howard, Custer, Okla. (Apr. 8, 1960); Mrs. P. Boyd Smith, Los Angeles, Calif. (Mar. 19-20, 1960); Bryce Timmons, Norman, Okla. (Apr. 28, 1960).

mark to guide travelers to the homesite for after a few months the sod roof would be covered with grass, wild flowers and weeds, blending so well with the countryside that it was difficult to find the dwelling. Many times people, livestock or teams pulling wagons would walk across the top of a dugout. In the summer months the women often cooked outside over a trench fire. The trench was just wide enough to hold the dutch oven, skillet and coffee pot.

Again, the lack of wood forced the people to find a substitute, this time for fuel. Buffalo and cow chips solved the problem. They were gathered and stacked like cord wood. On trips, a sack was carried, and a game of "I Spy" was played by the children. Cattle drives were allowed to stop on the land of farmers just for the chips they left. Twists of prairie grass burned nicely but quickly. The grass would be gathered and twisted into long ropes, then cut in the correct size for the stove or fireplace. Corn and corn cobs made a good fire and in the years when corn could not be sold profitably, it was burned. Sunflower stalks made good fuel. One firm advertised seeds for one acre, guaranteed to produce twelve cords, enough for all winter.

Furnishings were simple and were made from the things at hand. The table might be anything from a box or barrel to a log split and resting on pegs. Kegs and boxes were the chairs. Beds varied from pallets on the floor or table to logs driven into the walls and floor to support a frame for the feather, grass or cornshucks tick. Because space was so limited, the beds were often taken outside during the day to make room for the table and chairs. Storage was provided by pegs, shelves and boxes nailed to the walls.

By the time the land could be prepared, it was often too late for planting crops. Gardens could be planted and this was the first job undertaken after shelter was provided. Gardens consisted of onions, potatoes, carrots, pumpkins, watermelons, cantaloupes, peas, beans, corn, cabbage and lettuce. Settlers often did not have time nor materials to fence the garden plots. In the early years, many gardens were destroyed by wild animals, or even the farmers' own livestock. Potato bugs, grasshoppers and green bugs damaged gardens, too. Until gardens were producing, the need for green foods was filled by wild greens, including sheep sorrel, wild onions, watercress and wild lettuce. Plums, grapes and berries grew in some parts and furnished the juice and fruit for jellies and preserves. "Poor Man Preserves" were made using sorghum instead of sugar which was too scarce and too expensive.

Game, including prairie chicken, quail, antelope, turkey, raccoon, rabbit and "possum" was plentiful. The "possum" was fat, and the tallow could be used in cooking and making candles. One guest from the east insisted on knowing what his hostess had

used to bake such tasty biscuits. He was not very happy when he was told that the shortening was from a raccoon killed a few days earlier.

Measurements for recipes were not very exact and included such statements as a handful, a teacup heaped high, one pie plate full, a chunk of butter the size of a thumb or an egg or a fist. One recipe for pickles called for one gallon of whiskey, one handful of salt, a pint of sorghum and nine gallons of water. The cucumbers were added and were said to remain crisp until all were used. To make grape soup, the grapes were cooked and strained. The pulp was then sweetened and heated to boiling. Dumplings were added and cooked until tender.

Soap was made with lye and fats. The wood ashes were saved all year and collected in a hopper. Water was poured through the ashes and the liquid which drained out was the lye. All fats had been saved in another container, and these were added to the lye and boiled until the brew would dissolve the fuzz on a chicken feather with which it was tested. This was ready to be stored and used as soft soap. To make hard soap it was necessary to add salt and continue boiling. At the proper time it was removed and poured into shallow pans lined with cloth. When it had cooled the hardened mass was removed from the pan, the cloth peeled off, the bars cut and stored.

Candles were made at home, too. Strings and strips of cloth were dipped again and again in melted tallow. The tallow would harden between dippings and a coating was built up, eventually forming a candle. This was a tedious process, and candle molds were borrowed often. Using molds, the melted tallow was poured one time over the wicks and allowed to harden.

Water from boiled potatoes was used in making bread and as starch for clothes. Homemakers made their own yeast with flour, salt, sugar and water. These ingredients were mixed and set aside until the yeast action started. In making bread, some of the dough was kept to furnish a start the next time. Some women shared yeast "starts," especially if one was famous for her bread.

Food preservation was a difficult chore for there were few jars, cans or bottles. The solder on tin cans would be melted carefully with hot coals to allow the can to be used again. Meats were smoked, dried, canned or fried and placed in stone jars, covered with melted lard and stored in the cellar. If there was no cellar for storing vegetables, they would be placed in a pit lined with straw and covered with earth. In the first years, some women went to surrounding states to can fruits since the trees which they had planted were too young to bear. The canned foods would be stored in the cellar and carefully protected. In prolonged cold spells hot

coals would be carried to the cellar to keep the foods from freezing. Butter, milk and eggs were also kept in the cellar which might be some distance from the house. The items had to be brought to the table before each meal and returned after each meal. This meant many trips for the cook. Another method used to keep items cool and sweet was to hang them in the well or cistern but this too had drawbacks. When water was needed, it was necessary to remove the foods and replace them after the water was drawn.

Wells, food cellars and cisterns had other uses besides the basic one for which they were built. They served as shelters when there were tornadoes and prairie fires. Prairie fires were watched for and particularly dreaded. Often they could be seen for days in advance and preparations made for protection. Stock was rounded up and removed to a safe place. Often this would be the dugout or sod house. Any creek or river would do if it had sufficient water in it and if the animals could be kept there. Burning an area on which to stay while the fire passed on either side saved many lives. A furrow could be plowed around an area and the area might be spared. The only other methods considered satisfactory in fighting the fires were wet sacks or brooms to beat out the side fires, or dragging a dead animal along the fire line.

Water, like lumber, was a scarce item. Not many farms had rivers, creeks or springs. Supply and storage were major problems. A water barrel was an essential item. It was a familiar sight at all homes. The barrel caught and stored water when it rained. It was carried on a sled to haul water from any nearby source. Buffalo wallows, the depressions which the buffalo had made while fighting flies, were short term reservoirs after a rain but the water was too warm in summer for drinking and soon evaporated in the hot dry weather. Everything was utilized for water storage, tubs, pots, pans and hollow logs. Wells and cisterns were dug as soon as possible. No pumps were used and the water bucket was raised and lowered by hand.

If the source of water was far, on wash day the women would take the washing to the water. Near the creeks and rivers, they could find wood to build fires under the boilers, and could do the washing there where the wood and water were close. The clothes were rubbed on a washboard, boiled, rinsed and spread on the bushes and grass to dry.

Sewing took much of the homemakers time. It was usually done by hand but if someone in the neighborhood had a sewing machine, some work might be done in exchange for the use of the machine. Ironing, canning and cooking were the jobs most often done in return. Women's dresses required ten to fifteen yards of calico or muslin. These were made with full skirts, high necks and

long sleeves. It took seven yards of material for each of the two petticoats worn. Muslin cost about twelve cents a yard and calico was five cents a yard. A new baby would wear a band and diaper made from a feed sack, a flannel shirt, a petticoat and a calico overdress, the same width top and bottom with a drawstring at each end and slits for armholes.

At first there were no regularly scheduled freight routes, or lines. All supplies were brought in by individuals, and any settler who had a team and wagon usually did some freighting. Taking lists of supplies needed by neighbors, several men and wagons would travel to the nearest railroad and do the shopping for the whole community. The length of time spent on the trip varied according to the time of year and the condition of the rivers to be forded. When the rivers were up, it often meant several days delay until the waters subsided enough to permit passage. If a wagon became stuck, several teams would be harnessed together to free it. If this failed, the supplies must be unloaded and carried to the bank. At times it was necessary to dismantle the wagon, carry it to shore, re-assemble it and reload it before the trip could be resumed.

To obtain cash some men took jobs away from home, going as far away as surrounding states. The women and children were left on the homestead to do the work and tend the livestock. These were lonely, frightening times for there were panthers and wolves roaming the countryside. Indian uprisings were feared and rumored but seldom materialized. Those men who could find work near by came home at night and then with their wives, they would do the plowing, planting or harvesting on their own land. To have their children near, the parents would make a pallet for them in the field near a cornshock or hay stack while they did the work.

Women were traditionally entitled to the money from the butter and eggs sold. It was the only money to which they could look forward unless they boarded or did the laundry for a bachelor or homesteader whose family had not arrived.

Cattle and buffalo bones paid well in cash. They were collected and taken to the railroad when a freighter went for supplies. The bones were shipped east and used to make fertilizer.

At first mail service depended upon anyone who was going to the post office many miles away. The mail would be collected for several families and left with one neighbor until someone came for it. This resulted in stations being established in the homes of some of the settlers. One corner of the dugout or soddy became the postoffice. The salary was twenty dollars a quarter. Mail was basically catalogs, newspapers and a few personal letters.

Centipedes, scorpions and bedbugs were pests the homemakers had to fight. They lived in the sod used in the buildings and invaded the homes. Snakes were a menace, too. They were often found in the houses and even in the beds. One mother heard a rattlesnake in the dugout but could not locate it. She took the baby outside and put him in the wagon. Then she took a mother hen with some baby chicks inside and tied her to the table leg. When the snake came out to eat the chickens, the woman killed it.

Neighbors always helped when there was a death in a family. Wagon boxes and cupboards were donated for the coffin. It was painted with shoe polish or lamp soot and lined with muslin. Funerals were held the day of the death if possible and were conducted by someone chosen by the family, if a preacher could not be reached. If it was necessary to wait until the next day, friends would sit with the body during the night. When ice was available, the body would be packed in it and the face covered with a cloth dampened in vinegar. Land for a cemetery was usually donated by a homesteader on a corner of his claim.

Settlers had some problems in keeping their livestock. Corrals near the barn were fenced with sod but pasture fencing was in the future. Children had the job of herding the cows and horses to keep them from straying. When cattle drives came through the country, the cows of the settlers sometimes became mixed with the herd and were never separated again. But at times these cattle drives were responsible for the start of a herd for a homesteader. The cowboys would leave cows and calves which they felt were too weak to continue the trip.

Holidays were times of special joy to the children. Easter eggs were colored and the bunny eagerly awaited. The dyes for the eggs were made from the skins of red onions, walnut shells and berries. A box was propped over a nest prepared for the eggs and placed in the yard where it could be seen the first thing in the morning. If the box was resting flat on the ground, it meant the bunny had arrived. The box also protected the eggs from animals.

There were not many evergreens to be used for Christmas trees. The bare branches of other trees were covered with cotton and decorated with strings of cranberries, popcorn and china berries. Candles were the lights. If there was no tree, the table would be set for breakfast, and Santa Claus would place the presents in the plates. Sugar was saved for weeks to be sure that there would be cookies and candies on Christmas day.

For a wedding, ferns and wild flowers decorated the dugouts and sod houses. Only a few people could take part in the ceremony because the space was so limited, but any number of people could take part in the charivari. This celebration took place a few

nights after the wedding. Friends of the couple would assemble outside the home of the bride and groom, setting off fireworks, banging kettles, blowing horns and firing guns. The noise and hilarity would last until the couple appeared and served refreshments.

This would be the start of another home in the new territory, continuing the hopes and dreams of a hardy people. They had little material wealth but used the resources of the land to build a better life for themselves and the thousands who would follow.

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