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HOMES and FURNISHINGS Of EARLY NEBRASKANS

Cover picture: Mrs. G. E. Swanson in her kitchen at Wausa, 1904.

EXTENSION WORK IN "AGRICULTURE, HOME ECONOMICS AND SUBJECTS RELATING THERETO,"
THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES,
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN, COOPERATING WITH THE COUNTIES AND THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
LEO E. LUCAS, DIRECTOR

Homes and Furnishings of Early Nebraskans

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Houses and the furnishings within are shaped by many factors. Among these influences are: locally available materials, climate, general geographic conditions, social and economic conditions, trade and commercial opportunities, political events and inventions and discoveries.

The Locale

The area which is now Nebraska was considered a part of the Great American Desert by early explorers. The climate was severe—hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Winds blew frequently. The prairie offered little wood and stone, the traditional materials for building houses. Although good clay was available for making bricks, there was lack of fuel for firing them. In the extreme eastern part, building materials were available, but the great distance and lack of commercial transportation prohibited shipping these materials in the early days of settlement.

The earth lodges of the Omaha and Pawnee Indians may have influenced the Mormons to build sod houses in their first winter of 1846.

Economic and Social Conditions

Pioneers had to make their own social life on the frontier. Visiting neighbors was one form of entertainment. Helping each other was another, whether it was building a house, husking corn or a quilting bee. Hospitality was a virtue of the times and dances flourished in pioneer days. A new house or barn was often warmed with a dance. People would come for miles around and sometimes stay all night.

Church and school played an important part in the settlers' social life. Those with a common faith may have had their first meetings in a home. Schools had spell downs, ciphering matches, debates and box suppers.

Life on the frontier was not easy. Some settlers became discouraged from financial problems, drought or grasshoppers and left.

Trade and Commercial Opportunities

Trappers and traders came to the area early. Fort Atkinson was established in 1819 to protect fur trade in what is now Washington County. Cellar walls and fireplace brick may still be seen at the site.

When Nebraska became a territory in 1854, towns along the Missouri River were bustling ports and freight terminals. Peter Sarpy and other speculators at Bellevue organized town companies to interest people in settling there. The ferry business flourished.

Fine furniture was brought up the river from St. Louis for those who could afford it. The first piano was brought from there to Bellevue for Peter Sarpy's niece. An ex-sea captain built a house in the Florence area in 1855 with porches all around to simulate a ship's deck and brought carpets, a rosewood piano, wardrobe and silver service 3-feet high from St. Louis.

With the coming of the railroad, cheaper transportation made both ideas and materials available to all. Railroads promoted settlement. Settlers could send their family and household goods at a large reduction from regular rates of transportation.

A letter written from the Columbus area in 1872 read in part: "If newly arrived settlers have money to begin with they can buy 'ready-made houses' which are shipped from Chicago in numbered pieces and can be erected in a few days." The same letter went on: "Even a family without means coming from the east with their belongings can make a go of it here."

Historical and Political Events

Nebraska became a travel route in the 1850's for people going to California, Oregon or Utah. Forts were built along the overland trails to protect the immigrants.

When the Nebraska Territory was opened for settlement in 1854, 2,000 people already were living there. The Free Homestead Act entitled a person to claim 160 acres free after filing a claim for a fee of \$10.00 and living on the land for five years. Civil War veterans could use time spent in the army on the time needed to prove their claims. Daniel Freeman, a soldier, filed the first claim in the United States January 1, 1863, for his claim near Beatrice. It is reported that he took his wife Agnes and her hope chest across the Blue River on a flat boat.

Congress passed other Homestead Acts. Many settlers came to claim or buy land in the 60's, 70's, and 80's. Most of the first immigrants came from Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, New York, and Massachusetts. From Europe came Germans, Czechs, Scandinavians, Irish, Poles and others to find a better life in America. The nationalities often settled in colonies.

The government gave various railroads about 16 percent of Nebraska's total acreage. The railroads, anxious to dispose of the land, promoted settlement. Some railroads even maintained immigrant housing.

Inventions and Discoveries

Necessity and ingenuity helped pioneers solve many problems in establishing a home on the plains.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a method of building known as balloon framing developed when cheap machine-made nails were available. Lightweight two-by-four studs were nailed together to make a framework from foundation to rafter. This replaced the method in which heavy timbers were first fitted and pegged and then raised by group labor. With balloon framing houses could be built in a shorter time with inexperienced labor. This development came at a time when Nebraskans were building new homes or replacing their first ones.

Fencing homesteads was a problem. Unlike eastern states, Nebraska lacked an abundance of stone and wood for rails. Barbed wire, first marketed in 1874, was a great help.

In the late 1870's windmills came into use (first the homemade kinds) and helped to lighten the work of families.

EARLY HOUSES

The first settlers in Nebraska built log cabins (Fig. 1). These shelters were replaced with frame houses when materials and money were available. Some early houses in eastern Nebraska were built of brick or stone.



Fig. 1 Bodmer sketch of Bellevue, showing log houses in 1833.

When Nebraska became a state, Omaha was described as "a little prairie town with streets deep in mud or dust. Tiny two- or three-room frame cottages were the rule, with occasional two-story houses and a few brick ones."

As settlers moved west on the treeless plain, the homesteader used sod for his home. Some dug their first shelter out of a hillside (Fig. 2). Poles or planks were used to make a door frame and possibly a window. If the ravine was too shallow to form a natural roof, one could be made of poles, brush, grass and soil. Some dug-outs were so small that furniture was moved out so house work could be done. One bride wrote that she was living like a prairie dog.



Fig. 2 Dug-out house along the South Loup River in Custer Co., 1890.

Sod houses were more satisfactory than the dugouts. The sod was cut into strips and laid like brick. The average sod house on the frontier was a simple one-room, frame-supported structure. The more prosperous settlers shingled the roof or covered it with tar paper, but most were roofed with sod. If well made, the sod house had many good features. With its thick walls, it was warm in winter and cool in summer. Faults of the sod house included dust sifting down, a leaky roof and problems with insects and rodents.

Interior of Early Homes

Most pioneers worked hard to make their homes comfortable and attractive.

Walls were smoothed and plastered with clay and ashes. Sometimes they were papered or white washed. Sheets were used in the ceilings on some of the "soddies" to keep dirt from sifting down. Packed earth served as flooring until a puncheon floor of split logs was made or planks of wood laid. These floors were scrubbed with wood ashes to keep them light.

In some homes rag carpet was laid over straw. The carpet was made from worn-out clothing torn in strips and woven with colorful warp. In single-room cabins, a rag rug, a quilt or hide was used as a divider.

Heating

Log cabins were heated by a fireplace. Later immigrants brought a stove to serve as both heater and cook stove. Where wood was not available, buffalo chips—called "prairie coal" and later cow chips were used as fuel. Coal was available in railroad towns, but not all could afford it. Hay burning stoves were developed, but these were far from satisfactory. Corn cobs and stalks were burned. Even corn was burned when the price was low.

Lighting

Most pioneer families went to bed early and got up at dawn. Candles, either those known as tallow dips or those cast in a candle mold, were the main source of light. A few affluent people had lamps that burned whale oil or lard.

A lamp known as an "old hussy" was made by filling a bowl or cup half full of sand and placing a

stick upright in the center. A cloth to serve as a wick was twisted around the stick and enough animal fat poured over the sand to fill the cup. When lard was scarce, fat from opossums, badgers or other animals was used. The wick lighted at the top made a fairly good blaze.

Kerosene lamps were a great improvement in lighting. Kerosene was developed in 1854 and was in general usage in 1875. Keeping the lamps filled, the chimney clean and wicks trimmed added another chore for the homemaker.

The Furnishings of the Pioneer

Whether of logs, lumber or sod, the homes of most pioneers were simply furnished. A stove, table, chest, chairs and bedding were often brought along from the old home. Some homesteaders improvised their furnishings. People of means had fine furnishings shipped when transportation was available. The furniture was likely to be Victorian in style.

Beds

Few beds were brought along. Rope beds had side boards laced across with rope to make "springs." Beds were mostly the "knock down" variety. A bed was made in a corner by sticking two poles perpendicular to adjoining walls in a corner (Fig. 3). Where the poles met a post was set in the floor forming the only leg. A third pole was thrust in the wall at the corner of the house and attached to one wall. This, with the one at the foot, supported poles laid lengthwise as slats.

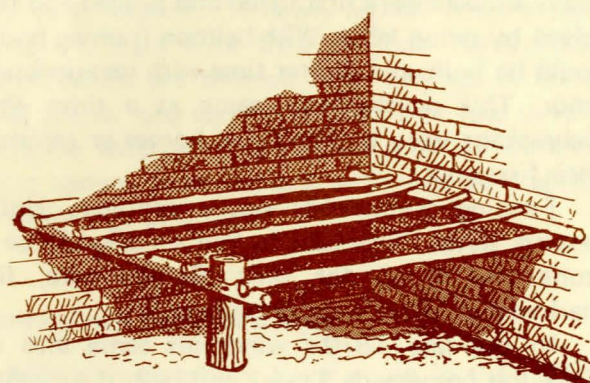


Fig. 3 Knock-down bed made of poles and plum branches.

One account tells of a bachelor ordering a fence board for his bed to be used with plum brush legs and slats.

Mattresses of straw, hay or corn husks were called bed ticks. Feather beds, which were highly prized, were used as a cover or as a mattress pad. During the daytime, the ticks were taken out to air. Bed ticks were sometimes used on the floor instead of on beds.

Seating Pieces

The pioneer who was not able to bring or buy chairs used nail kegs, boxes or tree stumps. Three-legged stools and benches were easy to make. Splint-bottom chairs were added later to replace these improvised pieces. The rocking chair was a popular later addition.

Tables

If the settler did not have a table, dry good boxes or planks were used. Cottonwood, while readily available, frequently warped and cracked. Tables were covered with oil cloth or flour sacking (Fig. 4).

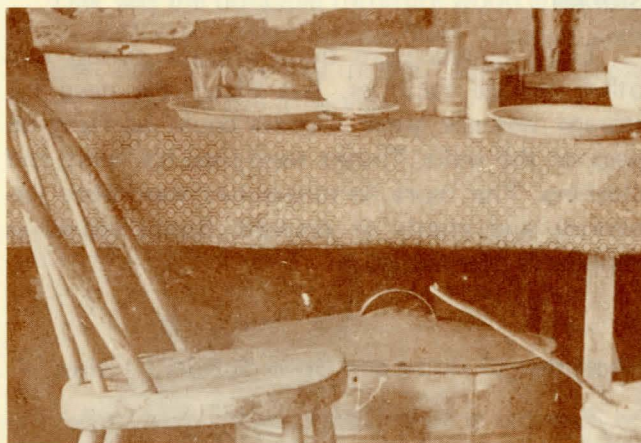


Fig. 4 Interior of an early home showing oil cloth on table, simple dishes and utensils.

Tableware

Some families brought their fine china and silver with them (Fig. 5). Molly Dorsey Sanford in her journal tells of a Sunday when four bachelors dropped by when provisions were low. "The girls set the table in our best appointments with a snowy linen cloth, nice glassware, and our hand-somest dishes."

Tin plates, case knives, and earthen bowls made up the tableware for many (Fig. 4).



Fig. 5 Early 20th Century interior and table setting with European-style standing knife and fork.

Storage

Early homes were built without closets and other storage facilities, but often the need for storage was not great. Clothes could be hung on pegs on the walls. Trunks were used for linens and clothing. The more fortunate had wardrobes (armoires) and chests of drawers. Boxes served as cupboards near the stove.

Reminders of Home and Other Special Touches

Families brought some personal items from the old home back east or from the old country. Among these were family portraits or photographs, clocks, maps, and even sea shells. Friendship quilts with names embroidered and gay patchwork were often included in the chest of household linens.

In the collection of photographs which Butcher took during 1886-1892 for a history of Custer County, we can see the sturdy pioneer families outside their sod houses, often with a prized possession such as a sewing machine or organ moved outside.

Potted plants were frequently seen in the windows. Several have bird cages hanging outside. Piles of antlers outside the door showed not only hunting skill of the man of the house, but were used to dry clothes (Fig. 6).

HOUSES OF THE LATE 19th CENTURY

Many of the pioneers who survived the blizzards, drought, grasshoppers and financial panic enjoyed prosperity. Mechanization brought many improvements to agriculture and to family living.

Some of the small cabins of the early settlement days were enlarged or replaced before the depression of 1893-1896. The brick houses in Brownville were built in the Italianate style before the 1870's. Lumber became reasonable in the 1880's, and by 1890 the soddies were disappearing.

Wealthy people hired skilled labor to build

Fig. 6 Sod house in Loup Co., 1886, with potted plants, birdcages and a pile of antlers in front.



mansions in varied Romantic styles (Figs. 7 and 8). Nearly every town has a former showplace of this era. Many of these large homes, hard to heat and maintain, have been adapted to become multiple dwellings or funeral homes. Many have been torn down.

Furnishings

With better times came new furnishings. The parlor was kept with care and reserved for special occasions. Evidence of culture and affluence was displayed in several ways: an organ or piano, music rack, phonograph, plate rail and china cabinets (Fig. 9). The photo album was proudly displayed.

Furniture was factory made and the majority of pieces came from Grand Rapids, Mich. Popular pieces were secretary bookcase combinations, china cabinets, wash stands, fancy pressed wood chairs and Morris chairs (Fig. 10).

Oak was the principal furniture wood and retail stores and mail order houses were flooded with mission and golden oak pieces. Many of these sturdy pieces are still in service.



Fig. 8 Otto Baumann's residence in West Point.

Fig. 7 An 1872 photo taken from the southeast corner of the Capitol ground in Lincoln shows the Kennard house, center, and Gillespie house on far right. Thomas P. Kennard was Secretary of State from 1867-1871, and John Gillespie was State Auditor from 1867-1873. The Kennard house is on H Street between 16th and 17th.

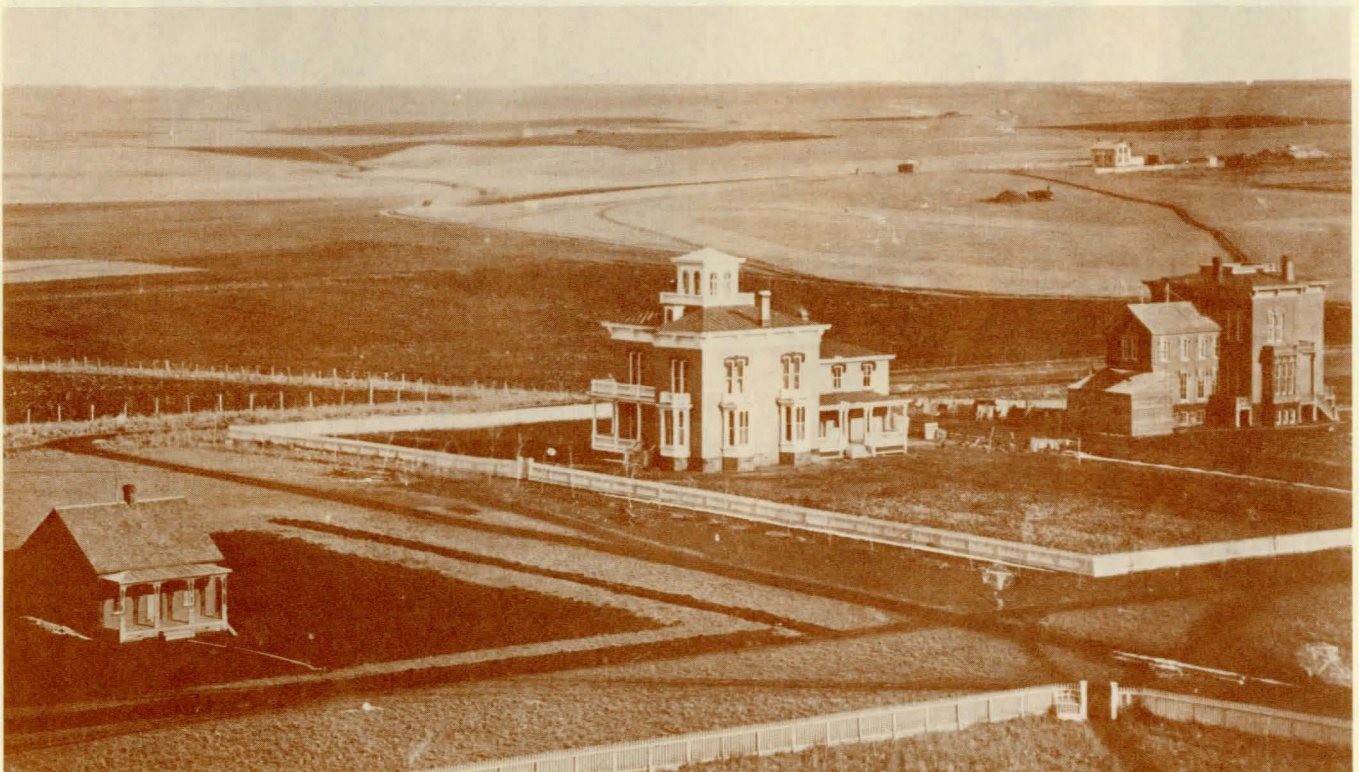




Fig. 9 Early 20th Century photo of Ivor and Iner Holmberg in the living room of their parents' home west of Loup City. Except for the curtains and one chair, all the furnishings, pictures and knickknacks were brought from Sweden.

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Fig. 10 The northwest room in the Bruner home in West Point in the early 1890's. Note the Morris chair, center.



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