

A HISTORY OF SELECTED HOUSES IN
OKLAHOMA BEFORE STATEHOOD

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The study of pre-statehood (1907) dwellings is important because some of the same factors that influenced the decision making of the pioneer settlers in the planning and construction of their homes influence families of today. The pioneer used construction materials which were easily obtained, economical, and, sometimes, energy efficient in that less fuel was necessary to stay warm. The anticipated occupancy of the structures varied and was a consideration in the type of construction chosen. Another important factor was climatic conditions which varied over the state from very dry in the southwest and panhandle with extremes of cold and hot temperatures; to the east; or Indian Territory, which received more rainfall and had less extreme temperatures. The decision making process also included the economic status, cultural background, and size of the family.

The decision making process, as described by Morris and Winter (1978), involves how the family perceives their housing deficit, what economic or financial constraints were felt, the alternatives considered, and how they were considered. All of these factors entered into the housing

decisions made by Oklahoma pioneers. The pioneers needed to provide immediate shelter for their families. The financial resources of Oklahoma pioneers ranged from almost nothing to great wealth. They had to consider how to feed their families as well as shelter them. Money was necessary for food until crops could be planted and harvested.

Natural resources as well as financial resources limited the alternatives for many families. The pioneer in Oklahoma Territory (Figure 1) had few logs for a log cabin nor did the settler in Indian Territory have buffalo grass sod to allow him to consider a soddie as an alternative. The decision was made to build a specific house, weighing these factors, not always consciously, plus the additional considerations of family and cultural backgrounds.

Oklahoma is a new state. It was a frontier, an agrarian, partly nomadic economy little more than 70 years ago. Its newness is interesting, but more distinctive are the differences among the people, the topography, and the geology within the state. The rainfall, climate, and vegetation are very different from east to west. There is timber in the east, the Cross Timbers (Figure 1) in central Oklahoma, and the plains in the west. The weather is as varied as the people. Before the runs for land west of the Cross Timbers took place in 1889, there were only cattlemen grazing their herds with the permission of the Indian tribes, missionaries to the Indians, and the Indians themselves.

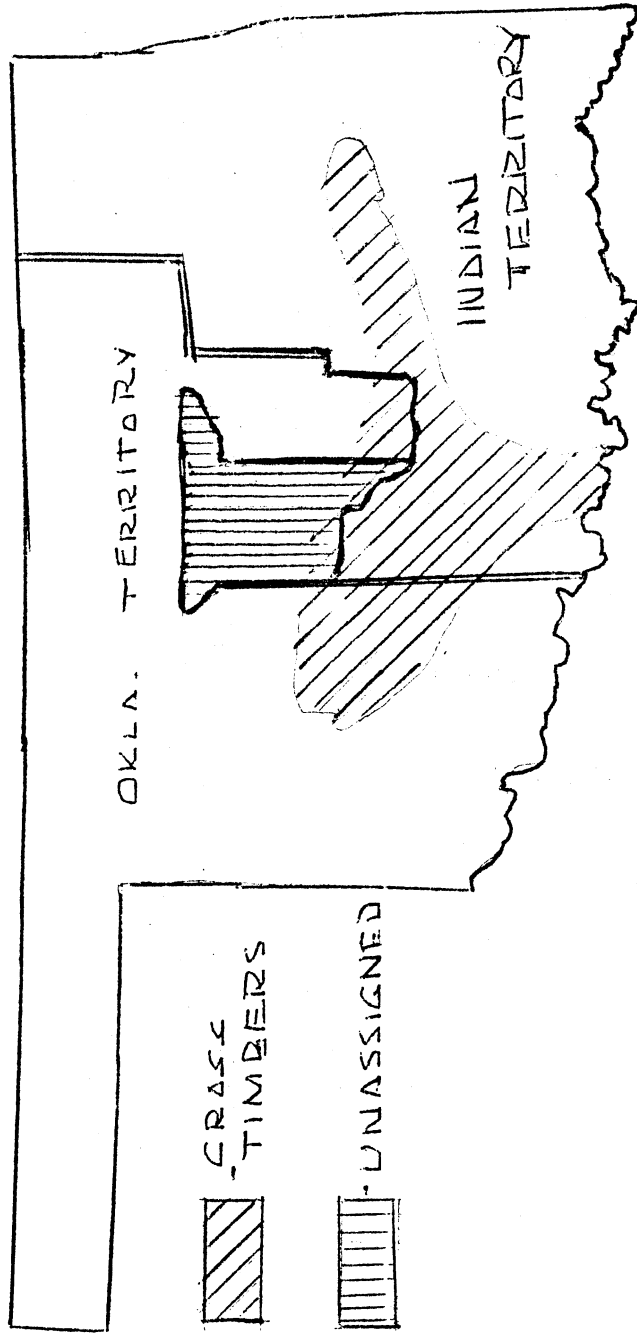


Figure 1. Map of Oklahoma

Then farmers, businessmen, and professionals moved in. They were not typical frontiersmen with guns across their knees, but had plows lashed to the sides of the wagons.

The types of houses in which Oklahomans lived are as varied as the people who lived in them. Adaptability and resourcefulness have been typical of Oklahomans as they provided shelter for themselves and their families. Depending upon the time of their arrival, the location of the dwelling, and the financial status of the family, the homes were as simple as a functional, quickly constructed dugout or as elaborate as an ante-bellum mansion to rival the plantation homes of the Old South.

A settler arriving in Oklahoma faced the same tasks that every pioneer in every age on every frontier has faced, that of immediately providing shelter, food, and water for his family. Johnson (1977) said that "housing was the most immediate concern" (p. 9). Until more permanent arrangements could be made, many people lived in tents or in their wagon beds, placed on the ground and covered with canvas. They built log houses and dugouts in the timbered areas, and structures known as dugouts and soddies were common in the area west of the Cross Timbers (Johnson, 1977).

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the ability of the Oklahomans to adapt than the variety of houses they constructed and the speed with which they replaced them with better structures as their financial status improved.

Pioneer dwellings were built from the resources of this land, and they varied with the industry and abilities of the builders as well as the locale. Many of the houses built before Oklahoma became a state are no longer in existence, but there are a few examples which can be found.

From examples of houses built before statehood, studies show that five types of houses were common. These include the dugout, the soddie, the log cabin, the plains' cottage, and the plantation or ante-bellum house. The dugout was the most primitive housing, as it resembled a cave. The soddie provided more conventional housing and was usually inhabited for a longer period than the dugout. The log cabin was introduced in America by Swedish and German immigrants who brought with them the skill and culture to improve housing for our settlers. The plains' cottage (1890-1907) was built along the same lines as the more modest frame homes built in the middle and late twentieth century. Wealthier settlers built the plantation or ante-bellum house and were able, by virtue of greater financial resources and more widespread availability of materials, to reproduce the luxurious, spacious homes of the southern United States.

The five types of homes studied here are typical of the shelters built by pioneers as early as 1800 by cattlemen; in 1840 by the Indian planters and merchants; in the early 1880s by the Boomers, who followed David Payne in

his several attempts to force the opening of the Unassigned Lands (Cunningham, 1969); and at the turn of the century (1900) by the white settlers permitted to settle in Indian Territory. Three of the five houses in this study are in existence, protected by the Oklahoma Historical Society. No trace of a dugout has been found, although Cunningham (1978) told of seeing the remains of those built in 1884 by the Boomers when he was doing research for Stillwater Where Oklahoma Began (1969). The plains' cottage is still seen in nearly every town and city in Oklahoma, although the specific house studied here was destroyed by fire in 1979.

The following chapters are studies of the different types of houses in chronological order. The earliest documented date for the dugout is 1879, although it has been suggested that cattlemen used them as early as 1800 (Marriott and Rachlin, 1973). The plantation house was built around 1844. The sod houses were common after the runs of 1889 and 1893, while the log cabins were built about the same time. The plains' cottages were built between 1890 and 1910. The study of each house investigates the reasons behind the decision to construct the house as well as a description of the house, the furnishings, and the family.

Case studies were made. A comprehensive study, which looked back to gain understanding of the development of the housing of the families, was made in each instance.

Personal interviews, public and personal documents, and observations during visits to the housing sites gave descriptions and explanations of the principal factors which contributed to decisions to build the houses. The only house not visited was the dugout. The use of case studies limited the houses chosen, which may not be representative of large numbers of settlers, but each was typical of the area.

CHAPTER II

ANTE-BELLUM HOUSES

The wealthy Choctaw and Cherokee planters and merchants who moved from the southern states to Indian Territory in 1839 duplicated their former homes and lives as closely as possible. This meant the building of plantation houses. These planters and merchants brought their slaves with them, thus requiring outbuildings in which to house the slaves and providing a built-in labor force. These particular settlers spent money on imported and refined materials with which to build their spacious homes.

These homes were a tribute to the gracious life of the South. However, the Civil War was responsible for the destruction of many of the beautiful homes because of the loyalties of the owners to the Union or the Confederacy. Both sides had active supporters in the area, which meant that with both sides destroying homes of families loyal to the other side, few remain.

One of these homes is the two-story log house which the Choctaw chiefs built in LeFlore County. Thomas LeFlore had a thousand acres around his large house which were worked by slaves. The Oklahoma Historical Society took possession of the house in 1960 and restored it (Oklahoma

Historical Society Pamphlet, n.d.). Gibson (1965) states:

The typical Oklahoma ante-bellum plantation consisted of the owner's house, a double-log dwelling connected by an open gallery or passage, the 'dog trot' between, with spacious porches in front. In the rear were located the slave cabins, barns, corral, smoke-house, stable, and kennel for hunting dogs. Later, the more successful planters replaced their log houses with pretentious mansions, furnished with carpeting, piano, library, and other elegant features of the better white homes (p. 169).

One interesting facet in the study of the homes of this type is the names they were given. The owners of these elaborate plantations selected names for their houses indicative of their location or as a reminder of the homes left behind. John Ross, a Cherokee, gave the name "Rose Cottage" to his fine Greek Revival style mansion at Park Hill, near present day Tahlequah, Oklahoma (Foreman, 1948). As the large house was no cottage, it is surmised that the name carried over from the log house which preceded it (Graebner, 1945). Robert M. Jones was of Choctaw blood. He built a 15 room frame house near what is now Hugo in Choctaw County. Because of the rose-covered hillside, the name "Rose Hill" was chosen for the house and plantation (Green, 1937).

One of the few houses of this type and period which still stands is the home of George Michael Murrell, a native of Lynchburg, Virginia, who built the house around 1844 to replace a log house given to him and his wife, Minerva Ross, by her father, Lewis Ross. Through the family of his wife, George Murrell qualified for land

ownership as a Cherokee (Foreman, 1948). After the United States government appointed him to assist in the removal of the Cherokees from Tennessee to the Cherokee Nation in 1839, he settled at Park Hill and became the fourth Postmaster.

Mr. Murrell, being a Virginian, loved fox hunting. He brought his pack of hunting dogs to Park Hill. His passion for this sport prompted him to name his house "Hunter's Home" (See Figures 2-7). Ross (1937) related:

One of the largest packs of hounds was owned by Major George M. Murrell of Park Hill . . . there hung in the large dining room a series of colored scenes depicting the English Fox Hunt, which scenes were a source of pleasure and imagination to visitors, both old and young (p. 297).

After the death of his wife, Minerva, George Murrell married her younger sister, Amanda, in 1857. To this marriage was born two sons and two daughters to share their large, 10 room house (Foreman, 1948).

A detailed description of "Hunter's Home" serves as an example of the wealth of the men who built such homes. It also points to their ability to draw on their wealth to gather and import the materials necessary to provide themselves with the gracious surroundings they left behind when they traveled to Indian Territory.

Blue grass surrounded Hunter's Home. It was the center of a compound which included an apple orchard, smokehouse, springhouse, slave quarters, barns, overseer's house, and mill. The front facade of the house is symmetrically balanced with two six-on-six double hung sash



Figure 2. Front (North) Entrance, Hunter's Home



Figure 3. East Elevation, Hunter's Home



Figure 4. South Elevation, Hunter's Home



Figure 5. North Elevation, West Elevation,
Hunter's Home

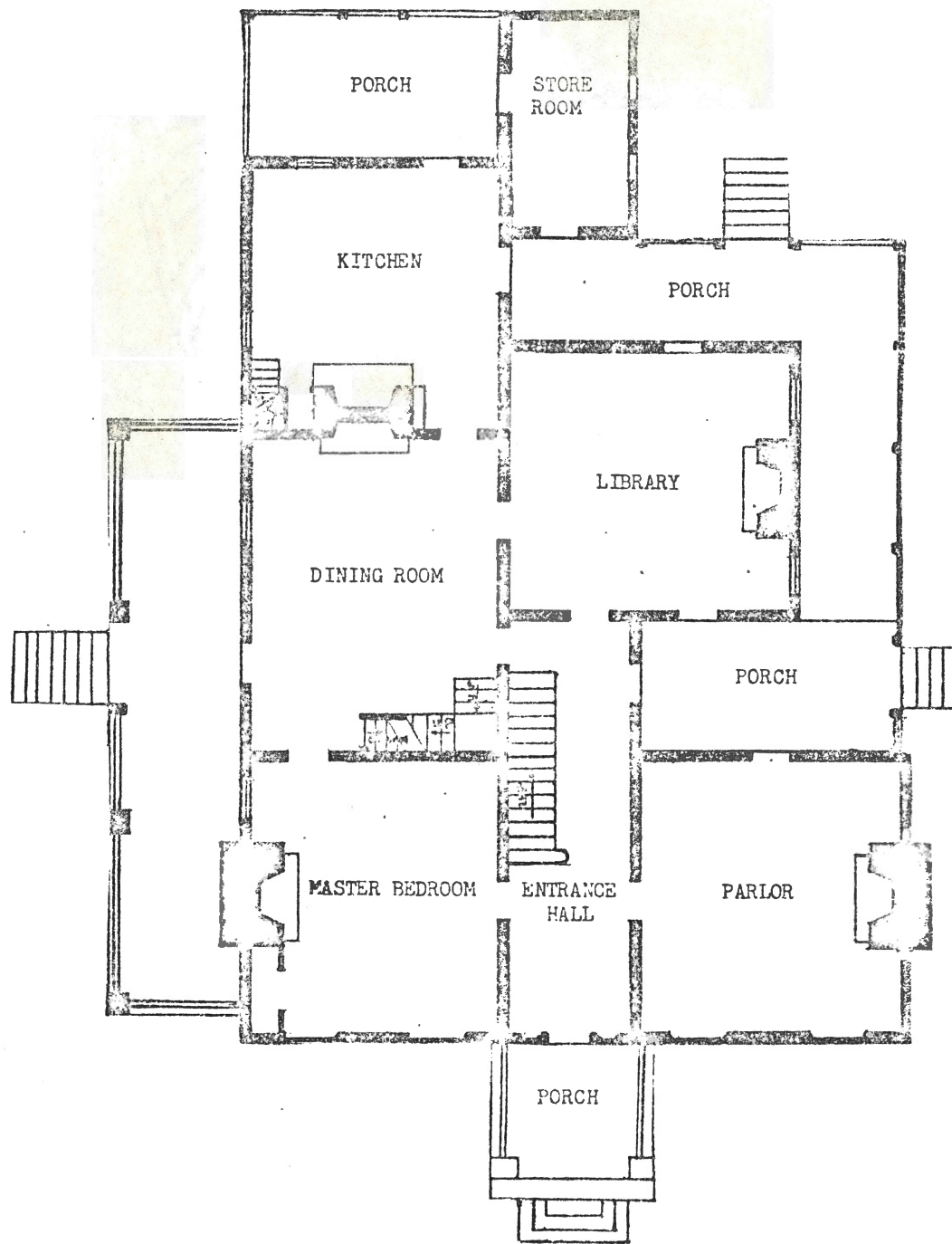


Figure 6. First Floor, Hunter's Home

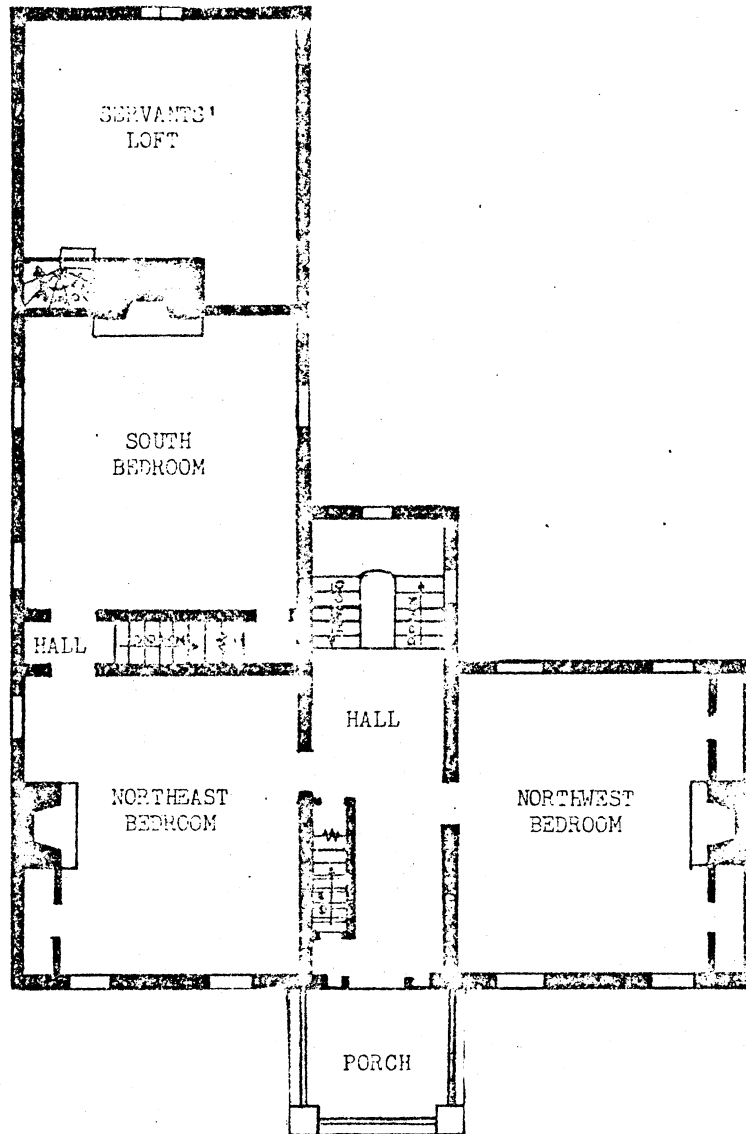


Figure 7. Second Floor, Hunter's Home

windows on either side of the front porches on both floors. The entrance is under a two story porch and has tall double doors of four panels each. The doors are slightly recessed between 12-paned side lights and beneath an 8-paned fan light. A pair of columns support the porch, and a simple pediment tops it. A balustrade of vase-shaped, wooden splats and simple banisters is between the columns and pilasters on the first floor and encloses the second story porch. There are also porches of varying sizes on the other three sides of the house.

Eight wood burning fireplaces served by four cut-stone chimneys heated the house. The chimneys are concealed, except for the extensions above the roof line, within the walls. The stone for the fireplaces, chimneys, foundation, and steps was probably quarried from nearby hills and the hand hewn studs, joists, and laths came from the same place. Although Murrell owned a steam-powered mill capable of producing finished lumber (Foreman, 1948), it is not known if the mill was operating when the house was constructed. The hand-made wrought iron nails, locks, and other hardware were probably imported from England (Ross, 1937).

Ten feet ten inch high ceilings on the first floor and eight feet eleven inch high ceilings on the second floor emphasize the size of the house. A cherry banister lines the staircase leading to the second floor. All woodwork except the balustrade and the banister is grooved and painted white. All windows are six-on-six set in panelled recesses

eleven inches deep. The original flooring in the home is of random width boards.

The furniture, too, was not purchased in Indian Territory, but imported from other areas of the United States and some from Europe. This furniture included a rosewood Empire sofa upholstered in red plush, and a massive bed and armoire of rosewood. Most of the original furnishings were either remaining in the home or returned to the house by relatives when the restoration of the mansion began (Ruth, 1978).

Hunter's Home and the other ante-bellum homes built before statehood stand, even if only in pictures and memory, as monuments. They tell the story of the men who left their homes to move into unsettled territory. With them, they brought the culture, money, and other resources necessary to give the frontier its first symbols of gracious living and its first examples of elegant architecture.

Materials and techniques used in building Hunter's Home were not available to every settler in Indian Territory. Wealthy people, then, as now, used financial resources to provide alternatives in housing. Also, the cultural background of Murrell had a great influence on the style of house which he built. Tall columns, large porches, many windows, and great hallways were typical of the plantation homes he left in the south.

CHAPTER III

DUGOUTS

The first homes of many Oklahoma pioneers were dugouts (see Figure 8). These were dug into the banks of creeks or sides of ravines and provided shelter until the crops were planted and better homes could be built. These sometimes resembled the caves of our prehistoric ancestors and, at other times, were half dugouts which were partially log or sod. Some of the earliest recorded dugouts were those lived in by the followers of David Payne (Cunningham, 1969) as early as 1879, although there may have been others before that time.

A dugout could be a hole dug in the ground or into a bank with a log pole roof covered with straw or sod. Most dugouts were constructed for temporary shelter. Because of this, they did not invest money, but used only the raw materials found on their land. Thus, part of the variation of dugouts was due to the differences in terrain from one part of the state to another, to the length of time it was to serve as a home, and to the amount of money available.

Along the many creeks in the area east of the Cross Timbers, people dug into the banks. These are the kind of dugouts the Boomers inhabited. The settlers in the prairie

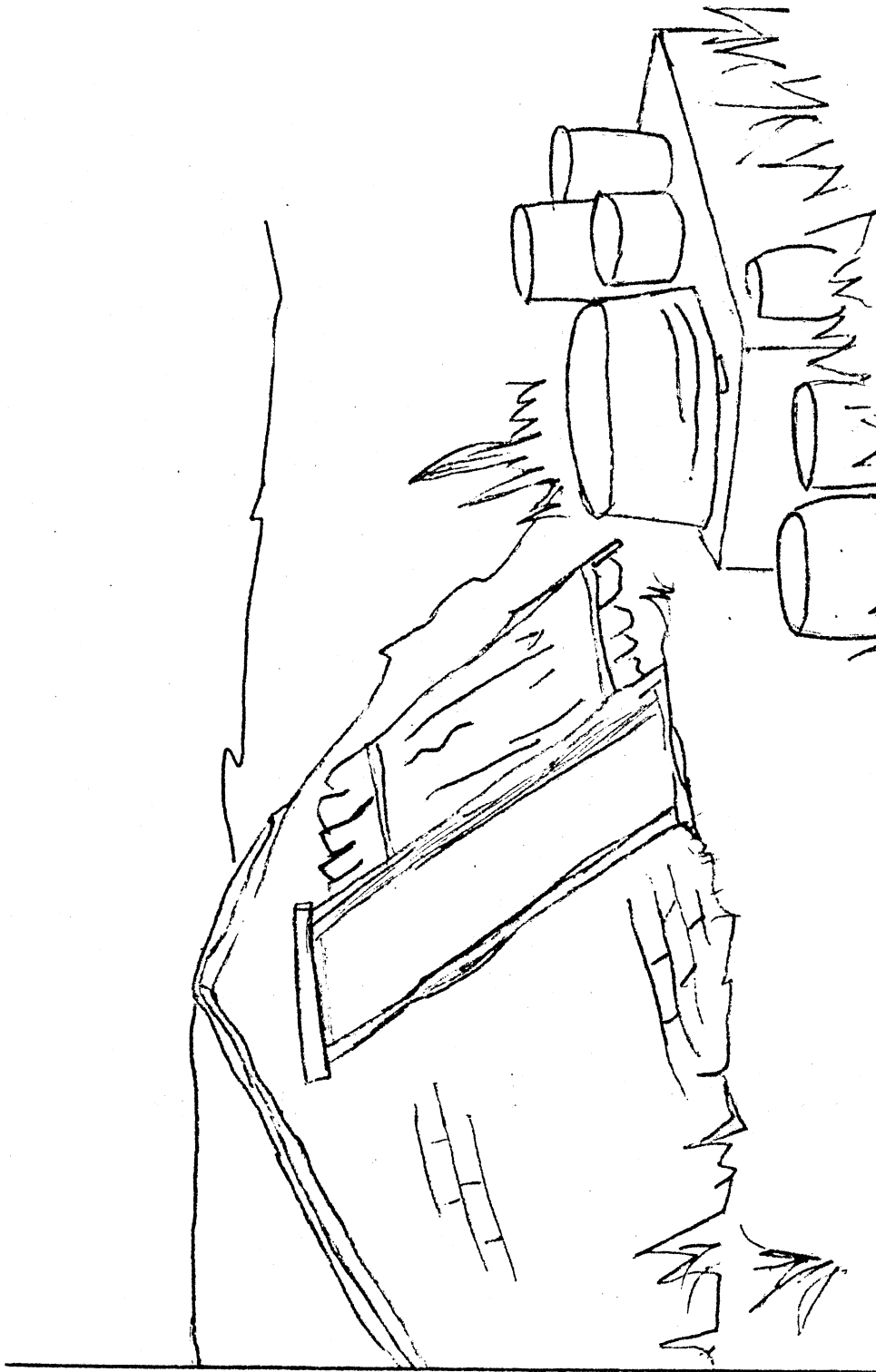


Figure 8. Dugout

area west of the Timbers were more apt to dig a hole in the surface of the flat land of Oklahoma Territory and build a half-dugout.

Where lumber was not available to the settlers, the most primitive dugouts were built. Z. B. Bird described some of the dugouts near Alva (Nelson, 1937):

Most people near Alva lived in half dugouts-- that is, three or three and one half feet of their homes above and the same below the ground. They could not afford lumber so they made thatched roofs from willows. With rush weeds or blue grass they would cover the thatched roof (p. 202).

George Stapleton told G. Turner (1937) that he built dirt walls on four sides of a low place and covered it with limbs "and my dugout was ready to live in" (p. 105). He lived there alone for the first winter, then brought his wife and daughter from Missouri. Five years later the family moved into a two room frame house closer to the road. R. J. Briscoe said that he, his wife, and four children lived in a dugout with a dirt floor (Coursey, 1937). E. R. Britton states that "It was interesting to ride along the roads and see the children stick their heads up out of the ground and watch us go by" (Yates, 1937, p. 370).

In areas with increased moisture and different soil conditions there were two good reasons why the dugouts were less crude and more akin to conventional housing. The first was available lumber. The second was the need for stabilizing the soil which had less clay content and was more easily eroded. Using both timber and soil added

stability. Buchanan and Dale (1935) give a description of this type of dugout:

A hole sixteen to eighteen feet long, ten to twelve feet wide, and four to six feet deep was dug, and on each side of this a wall was built from logs or sod. These walls were usually from two to three feet high. Light and air entered through small windows. A ridge-pole placed a foot or so higher than the walls was supported by posts at the middle of each end. From this, poles placed at intervals ran to the walls. Willows or heavy grass placed on these poles and covered with sod or a layer of dirt three to four inches which formed the roof. . . . Steps cut in the earth led down to the floor which was usually made of dirt. A door at the steps and a sod chimney at the opposite end of the structure completed this rude habitation (p. 237).

In 1896, when Mrs. H. E. Root and her husband moved to Pawnee, the roof of her dugout was made of split poles covered with hay and dirt. All the dugouts had dirt floors so the walls and floor could be swept down. Some of the women worried about the safety of such a habitation against the dangers of nature, even while speaking of the energy efficient way the dugouts combated the elements. Mrs. Root told Goldie Turner (1937):

I was always afraid of finding snakes, centipedes, or tarantulas in it and was always looking for them but there were never any found. We only lived in it for about three months before we got our frame house built. The dugout was a cool place to live, though. We got our water from a spring close to the dugout. I was certainly glad to move into the frame house (pp. 36-37).

The dimensions of the dugouts were fairly uniform. They were small. Their use was to fulfill a need for cooking, eating, and minimal shelter. A large family could

subsist with very little floor space, probably because they knew the conditions were temporary. An example of this crowded living was described by A. T. Whitworth (1937), who supported a family of eight and had a helper. They lived in a dugout which was 12 by 14 feet.

J. J. (John) Allen, a one time mayor of Enid, used a more extended arrangement. He housed his large family of father, mother, six children, and one or two helpers in a "dugout . . . 10 x 12, with a little room built on top and some of us lived in a tent" (Foreman, 1937, p. 267).

Due to the size of the dugouts and lack of trade, furniture was limited. Only the essential furniture was used and when even that was unavailable, the pioneers were as resourceful and basic while furnishing their homes as they were while building them. Mr. Z. B. Bird (Nelson, 1937) said:

Their furniture consisted of what they could have in the wagon. Perhaps they could secure, if they were lucky, a box or two from town for table or chairs. Some slept on floors. Some slept in wagons. Some ate standing up or used their chuck boxes (p. 703).

Whitworth (1937) listed his furniture as "table, chairs, bedstead, cupboard and stove" (p. 388) and added that it made his home very crowded.

As witnessed by previous quotations, some of the families were quite large. Their use of existing resources points to intelligent people with good sense. Although the homes they built in the beginning were not, by contemporary standards, places where educated, successful people

would choose to live, Mr. Z. B. Bird (Nelson, 1937) tells of people who made their successes:

They were not a low class of people who did these things, like you will find in some slums. Some were college graduates. They had brains, too, and sense to make use of every advantage. But they had no surplus (p. 203).

The builders of dugouts were more concerned with immediate shelter than with permanent shelter. Their financial resources limited their choices and their housing had to be built of available natural resources. They used most of their time and money for planting crops rather than building houses. The dugouts reflected their financial resources more clearly than they reflected their cultural backgrounds.

CHAPTER IV

SODDIES

In certain parts of the state, sod homes were the most feasible housing for some families. Several factors prompted the building of these homes and one of the more obvious ones was availability of materials. Research by the Oklahoma Historical Society approximates that one-half acre of buffalo grass would furnish enough sod for the walls and roof of one 256 square foot house (OHS Pamphlet, n.d.).

Another positive aspect of the sod house was the energy efficiency provided by the thick earthen walls. This was a bonus which surprised settlers upon habitation, but it was certainly an advantage. The diverse temperatures in Oklahoma called for protection from the elements, and Barns (1930) praised the interior comfort of the sod house when he said: "The house wall being three feet thick made a surprisingly comfortable home, being warm in winter and cool in summer" (p. 61).

In order to cut the slabs of sod necessary to build the thick walls, a specific tool was used. The 16-inch plow, called a sod plow, turned the grass-covered soil to a depth of approximately six inches (Gibson, 1965, OHS Pamphlet, n.d.).

Like the dugout described in the previous chapter, sod houses were built for temporary shelter, yet they fulfilled their purpose for a longer period of time than dugouts, due to the fact that they were more conventional and seemingly more comfortable. Most sod homes were lived in for anywhere from 2 to 12 years, usually until enough money was acquired to provide wooden frame housing for the family.

In The Spirit of '89, Stoner (1969) related that his father, who made the Run of '89 and homesteaded near Cashion, lived in his one room sod house for five years. Stoner also said his father's sod home was made of layers of tough prairie sod held together with long buffalo grass roots and cut into uniformly sized blocks. The corners were plumb, with the blocks alternately lapped to tie side and end walls together. Any cracks were daubed with clay mud.

The builders used much caution to align the sod so that the walls would be straight. The furrows made by the sod plow were of even width and thickness so the walls rose evenly. After the walls were constructed they were carefully trimmed to symmetrical proportions by using a well-sharpened spade (Barns, 1930).

The interior walls were finished using plaster and sometimes whitewash. Stoner (1969) states that many of the walls, both inside and out, were plastered, then white-washed. The type of plaster used was dependent upon what

material was available. Barns (1930) said of many sod homes: "the inside side walls plastered up with the gray colored clay dug from the black surface dirt, made a very presentable wall when finished" (p. 61).

The type roof used for sod homes varied according to need, affordable materials, and also according to the weight of roofing the house could support. Those builders, who had to layer natural raw materials such as crooked limbs, brush, or cornstalk and layers of earth, had to make certain that the walls of their homes were structurally sound enough to stand the strain of the very heavy roofs.

The settler without money to buy boards and other finished materials found that the roof was the most difficult part of the home to build. When money for boards was not available, the roof was made of limbs, brush, prairie grass, and a thick layer of dirt and sod. All these layers required that forked trees be planted in each end of the house and the builder rested a ridge pole log in the forks which reached from gable to gable. This ingenuity and these available materials provided the necessary roof for the families unable to afford a lumber roof (Barns, 1930). Other materials used as lumber roofing substitutes included split blackjack logs or cornstalk layers (OHS Pamphlet, n.d.).

Another method called for materials usually unavailable to the typical settler, either because of his lack

of money to buy them or due to the fact that these materials were not found on his plot of land. Barns (1930) describes one such roof:

The most expensive soddies were made with a framed roof with a ridge peak in the middle, using 2 x 4 dimension stuff for rafters set on a 2 x 6 plate on the walls. Sheeting was nailed on the rafters and tar paper spread over the sheeting boards. This was again covered with sods somewhat thinner than the sods used for side walls. . . . such a roof would shed water very well . . . (p. 60).

A builder who had more money and/or needed the house to be liveable for a longer period used this method.

In some homes a board floor was laid, then perhaps covered with a rug brought from the previous house. Such flooring was typical of the sod homes built by settlers who brought money with them. In some cases flooring was laid a year or so after habitation, when the owner was better able to afford more comfort (Barns, 1930).

Sod homes were furnished according to purchasing power or creativity, and almost always with regard to need. Barns (1930) thought the type roof gave indication as to the furnishings, saying:

In case the homesteader lacked means to cover his 'soddy' with a board roof, or make a floor, it is apparent that his furniture was meager, unless he had brought it with him. Bunks were made by forked poles and slats driven into the sod walls. A table was made the same way. Boxes given them by the town merchants did service as chairs (p. 70).

Barns (1930) also suggested that the houses with board floors and roofs probably contained nice furniture.

Maybe the settlers had carpet on the floor, or perhaps even an organ or piano brought from the owner's previous home.

Sod houses were basically 16 feet wide when measured from the outside and their length varied, depending on the need and material resourcefulness of the family (Barns, 1930). Of course, some were enlarged as time progressed, as was the home of Mr. John Zmotony (Turner, 1937). His home was initially a one room sod house with a split shingle roof. When his family joined him, they needed more space, so another room was added. His complaint was that the roof always leaked. The next year he built a larger stone home.

In The Settlement of Oklahoma, Buck (1934) gives a good idea of the types of families who settled in Oklahoma during the era in which sod homes were inhabited. He stated:

Although a great many of those who took up homesteads were farmers who wished to better their conditions, there were also a large proportion of people from the other walks of life who, having won a quarter-section in the rush, were forced to live on it and turn farmers in order to prove up their claims (p. 450, Vol. III).

One of the last remaining structures of the thousands of sod houses built in the plains region of North America is in Aline, Oklahoma (Figures 9 and 10). Marshall McCully took part in the "run" of September 16, 1893, and built this two-room house on his 160 acre claim in southern

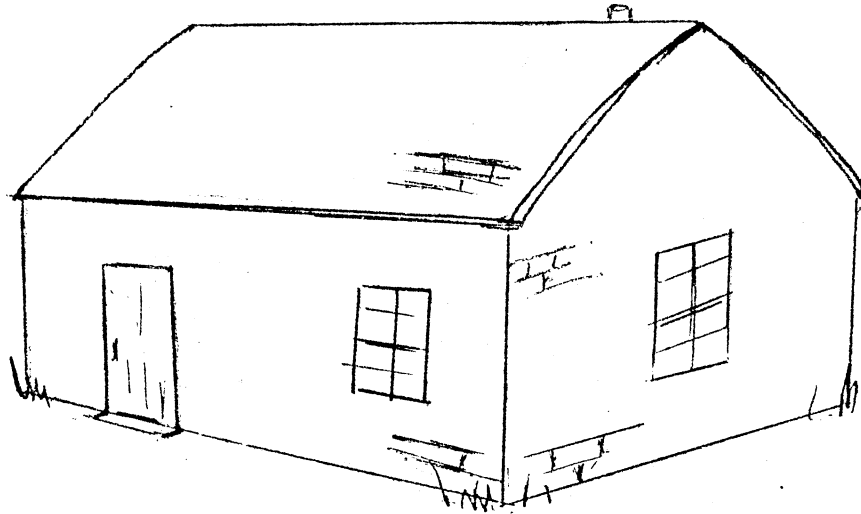


Figure 9. Marshall McCully Sod House

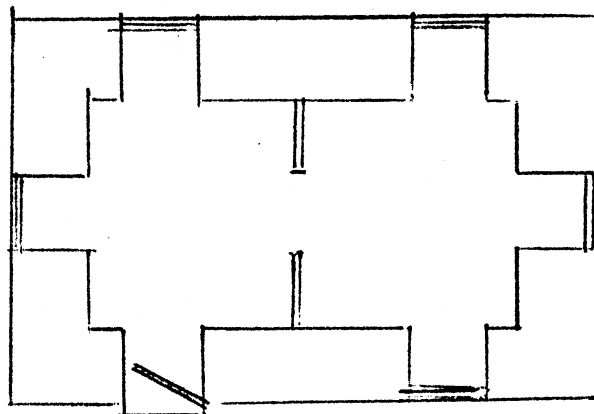


Figure 10. Floor Plan,
McCully Sod House

Alfalfa County, after living in a one room dugout for nearly a year. This followed the pattern of many Oklahoma pioneers who rapidly bettered their living conditions.

McCully had neither trees nor buffalo grass sod on his claim. His neighbor one mile north had homesteaded virgin prairie with buffalo grass sod and a trade was made. One-half acre of this sod gave enough 16 inch by 36 inch by 6 inch slabs to provide walls and roof for the house. The slabs were laid as though they were brick or stone. McCully's walls were the thickness of two slabs, approximately 36 inches, providing good insulation against the extremes of Oklahoma weather (OHS Pamphlet, n.d.). Allne is in Alfalfa County and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Bureau of Chemistry and Soils (Goke, 1933) states that the mean annual temperature in the county was, at the time, 58.6 degrees Farenheit, with an average rainfall of 29 inches, which probably prolonged the life of the soddie.

No studding was used in building the house and the original floor was dirt. Dampened and swept repeatedly, the floor was soon hard and smooth. About a year later, wood flooring was laid. The windows were set in the exterior walls, leaving wide window sills. The sod roof rested on a blackjack oak ridgepole and semi-rafters of small, split blackjack logs were placed close together. The interior of the McCully house was plastered with a clay-like material made of water and clay. This mixture

was found in beds along Eagle Chief Creek and on the Cimarron River.

Like most of the better soddies, this one had ceiling covers made from flour sacks to prevent dirt, snakes, insects, and other unwanted items from fallin on the family. Of the original furnishings in the soddie, only the stove, clothes plunger, and most of the dishes and kitchen utensils remain. The other furnishings were destroyed by a fire in the McCully home west of the soddie in 1963 (OHS Pamphlet, n.d.).

The soddies built as temporary shelters were as varied in size and finish as the people who built them. Each used the materials available to provide for their common necessity; each family needed a home to live in while they worked to provide a living and to make a better life for themselves and for their children.

McCully built his temporary houses, first a dugout and then a soddie, with the available materials, to meet the needs of his family within the limits of his finances. His cultural background dictated a move to better housing as he prospered. McCully eventually moved his growing family into a large frame house and used the sod house for storage.

CHAPTER V

LOG CABINS

The log cabin has been the typical dwelling in timbered frontiers for as long as two centuries (Shurtleff, 1967). The first extensive use of log cabins in America was by Scandinavian immigrants (Harrison, 1973). This unique construction was used in Scandinavia as long ago as the Middle Ages (Mercer, 1976). These and other immigrants brought with them the necessary skills to make good use of the readily available hardwood found in the areas of Oklahoma east of the Cross Timbers, where most of the log cabins in Oklahoma were built (Buck, 1934).

Through the legends concerning the early settlement of the United States, the log cabin became a symbol of the self-reliance, courage, and ingenuity of the American people (Bealer, 1978). Indeed, the settlers faced with immediate need for shelter were admirable for their resourcefulness. They could not wait for a traditional house to be built and there was no readily available labor for hire. A man and his family, with occasional aid from friends, had to depend on themselves to fulfill the need for substantial shelter. Bealer states: "It would be foolish to romanticize or exaggerate the quality

of life in a log cabin" (p. 62). Yet, the log cabins then stood, and some still stand, as monuments to the hardships endured and survived in order to establish Oklahoma as it is known today.

Log cabins tell, as do all types of housing, the story of the people who built and lived in them. The floorplans of most of the early log cabins show a lack of privacy and the use of very small quarters to house large families. The floor plan traced to an English adaptation of the Swedish log house was quite simple. The cabin formed a 16 x 16 foot square with one door, perhaps a window or sometimes two, a fireplace for heat and cooking, and a root cellar underneath the floor to be used for keeping perishables cool. The Scotch-Irish tended to build rectangular cabins, 16 x 20 feet in size (Bealer, 1978). Some houses were used as temporary shelter until more conventional housing was ready, but in some cases, these cabins were lived in for generations with perhaps a room or two added for additional living space.

The only essential tool used to build a log cabin was an axe, yet more skilled craftsmen also used the mortise axe and broadaxe. Two basic construction types were used to build the walls. The even-tiered wall had mortised corner posts or a trough of two planks to hold the logs in place. Alternating tiers using notched logs were strong and many variations of this method were used. The pioneers, following the Swedish method, notched the ends

of logs from felled trees to fit snugly together and left a hole in the split-board roof to let the smoke out. The Germans built cabins of square-hewn logs, with thatched roofs and a center chimney (Billington, 1949).

Tall, straight trees were used for constructing the walls of the cabin. Large post oak trees, hickory, ash, bois d'arc, and walnut lent themselves well to this type of construction and grew in profusion in many areas of Oklahoma (TPA Magazine, 1906). Cottonwood trees were also used in Oklahoma (Bealer, 1978). Construction of the walls required heavy lifting. The solution was a social gathering which provided the manpower to hoist the massive logs. In the event that this help could not be summoned, as few as four men using levers could construct the walls (Bealer, 1978).

The method used to fill gaps between the logs to ensure a more comfortable and stable dwelling is called chinking. Bealer (1978) says that chinking was often done by women and girls using poles to jamb between the logs, then packing mud or moss around the poles. Mercer (1976) lists several other materials used to chink the walls. These were wooden chips or stones smeared with clay and occasionally faced with lime or mortar. Obviously, the settlers achieved weathertight housing by using whatever suitable, available materials they could find.

When the walls were about shoulder height, the hearth, door, and window openings were cut. This method helped to

provide the straight lines that might not be accomplished by using logs already cut shorter when building the wall. The use of oil soaked paper or small panes of glass, when available, provided covering for the few small windows in the cabins (Bealer, 1978).

Roofing used for the cabins depended on the preference or cultural background of the builder, and the materials at hand. German settlers generally made a thatched roof at first and later replaced it with a tile or shingle roof (Billington, 1949). Bealer (1978) said of roofing:

Once the rafters were in place and the purlins nailed down, the roof could be covered with good split shingles in an hour or so by a swarm of men hammering away. If the shingles were of long-lasting wood, a new roof might not be needed for 50 or 75 years (p. 67).

He also said the shingles were nailed in place while they were still green to help prevent their splitting while they were being nailed down.

Flooring used in the homes was probably either stone or log (Woods, 1979). The availability of wood for wooden floors is certain in areas where ample timber grew. Bealer (1978) said that most foundations were of stone, either of drywall construction or connected with clay mortar. Where stone was available, it may also have served as flooring. It is possible that in more temporary, primitive log huts, the floor was earthen (Bealer, 1978).

The exteriors of the log cabins varied. Most were surrounded by a cluster of buildings used for barns,

corncribs, and chicken houses. All of the buildings were made of logs. The number of buildings depended on need, convenience, topography, available logs, and the builder's taste. Bealer (1978) described such homesites when he wrote:

Sturdy and indestructible though they were, there was an ethereal quality about such buildings. They appeared almost as visions from a distance, set solidly against a background of woods or fields. Approaching them on a frosty morning in fall, when the wood smoke from the chimney lay close to the hoary ground, one could sense the security, the coziness and protection offered in the simple room with the low-blazing fire (p. 20).

The article of furniture most spoken of by Bealer (1978) is the bed. Most settlers made the beds themselves and prized them and prominently listed them in their inventories. He states that the children generally slept in a loft, serviced by a tiny stairway or a ladder made of pegs or boards. Bed covering was padded with goose down, corn shucks, or straw. Wealthier settlers acquired furniture from traveling cabinetmakers or peddlers. Those families with less money or opportunities to buy, built their own chairs, chests, stools, tables, and benches.

One versatile item used in the cabins was the quilt. The pioneer woman made quilts that were not only used as bed coverings in winter, but also to provide a little privacy when hung from the ceiling. Although privacy was not a major consideration in building log cabins, it is difficult to imagine the relatively large pioneer families

growing up in a space no larger than today's one-room kitchenette apartment. Yet, most pioneers who built log cabins were from large families who were reared in small homes. Most were raised in farming families. Larger families were an advantage to the settler who needed much help. The responsibilities of such a family kept them outside the cabin and this may be the reason for their ability to live in such small buildings (Bealer, 1978).

Robert S. Kerr, who became a United States Senator from Oklahoma, was born in a 14-square foot, windowless log cabin (Figures 11-15) in Indian Territory near what is now Ada, Oklahoma, in Pontotoc County. His parents, William Samuel and Margaret Wright Kerr, were pioneer settlers when they arrived in Pecan Grove Valley in the Chickasaw Nation.

Sam Kerr was born January 13, 1868, in Bakersfield, Missouri, where violent hatred growing out of the Civil War plagued the border country. He was only nine months old when Quantrill's raiders murdered his father. After more raids and the killing of an invalid relative, Sam's mother moved to a relative's farm near Arkansas. Sam was five years old when his mother died and his uncle raised him. Since several of the raiders lived in the area, Sam chose to move rather than carry on the feud (Messenbaugh, 1941; Morgan, 1940).

In 1885, Sam Kerr left for Texas where he worked as a field hand and attended subscription schools between crops,



Figure 11. Front (South) Elevation, Kerr Cabin



Figure 12. East Elevation, Kerr Cabin



Figure 13. North Elevation, Kerr Cabin



Figure 14. West Elevation, Kerr Cabin

earning the equivalent of a high school diploma, which qualified him to teach in addition to his farm chores. There is a disagreement about significant dates in (Sam) Kerr's life. Morgan (1940) says that he was married in 1893 and leased 169 acres in Pecan Grove Valley in 1895. Messenbaugh (1941) states that he married in 1886 and settled near Pecan Grove School in 1894, when he erected the log cabin. It is agreed that he married Margaret Wright before leaving Texas. According to Messenbaugh (1941), the Kerrs left the log cabin for a home in Ada in 1897. The last six of seven children were born in the log cabin, according to Morgan (1940).

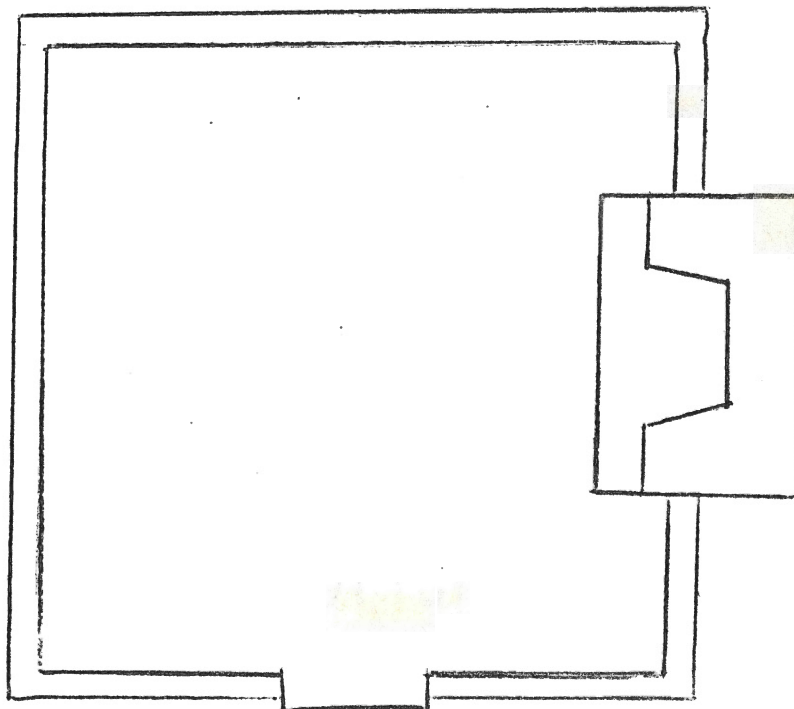


Figure 15. Floor Plan, Kerr Cabin

The TPA Magazine (1906) tells us that hardwood trees of great value grow all around Ada. Oaks, hickory, ash, bois d'arc, and walnut are accessible and grow in great numbers. Sam Kerr cleared some fields and had the lumber necessary for the construction of the house he built following the common English floor plan. It was 16 feet square on a native stone foundation. The only opening, a six foot door, faced south. The fireplace, built of the same stone as the foundation, was on the east. As more children were born, the family needed more room. At some time after inhabiting the original building, he added a lean-to shed on the north and a covered porch across the south. A ladder leads to a sleeping loft over the main room. The boys usually slept in the loft.

Sam Kerr was an ambitious man who was self-educated and wanted a good life for his children. As a member of the Ada City Council, he helped organize the public school system and the public water system. He became the first teacher in the school. After statehood he was the first county clerk (Messenbaugh, 1941; Morgan, 1940).

With many obstacles, the pioneers survived and some prospered using the land to their advantage. The log cabin provided housing which, in many instance, was comfortable. It sheltered the family from the drenching spring rains and harsh winter winds typical of the Oklahoma climate. Bealer (1978) states:

The log cabin, like the American people, had its origin in Europe. And like the American

people, that potpourri of culture faced with the problems of survival in a wilderness, the log cabin was adapted to American conditions and served its function well (p. 11).

Sam Kerr left family ties behind and moved his wife and small child to Indian Territory for a new start. His limited finances, English pioneering background in Missouri, and the natural resources near Ada led to the decision to build the small log cabin. Here is where his younger children, including Robert S., were born. Robert S. Kerr was the last nationally known American politician to be born in a log cabin (Bealer, 1978).

CHAPTER VI

PLAINS' COTTAGES

The plains' cottage, as identified by Gottfried (Personal Interview, 1980), was found in the area between the Mississippi River and the Continental Divide. The dwellings varied because of the skill and artistic ability of the carpenter who built them, and the desires, needs, and financial resources of the owner. Many of them were homes which were ordered from pattern books or from the Sears and Roebuck catalog. These were small houses which were available because of the advance in technology to people with limited incomes. The Gordon-Van Tine Company of Davenport, Iowa, advertised a "Quality Home" for \$529, which included all lumber, millwork, hardware, tinware, and paint (Humphreys, 1976).

Woodward (1978) states:

The additions of porches, verandas, bay-windows, etc., increase the effect of cottage-houses to a very considerable degree, add much to interior convenience and beauty, and, if put on at the time when the building is constructed, do not materially augment the expense (p. 10).

The plains' cottages had many of these features, plus the addition of the embellishments which were examples of the handiwork of the individual carpenter. The additions gave

rise to the term "Carpenter Gothic" and were typical of many houses built in the Victorian era.

Woodward (1978) advocated many new advances which were incorporated in the plains' cottages. Included in them were

. . . the neat, modern wire-gauze window-guard, which does not obstruct air or sight, and does keep out effectually flies, millers, gnats, beetles, spiders, mosquitoes, bats, cats, and the whole list of nuisances . . . (p. 53).

He also advocated that, after carefully selecting the interior woodwork of the cottage, it should be stained with either satin-wood or light black-walnut, laid on with oil and then covered with two coats of varnish. This would give "the nearest approach possible to the appearance of the above-named woods" (p. 27).

Karp called the bracket the "oratory of the carpenter," for he felt this was the age that produced great orators and a great deal of oratory. The bracket is primarily an enrichment of the porch which has been acclaimed as an American contribution to architecture and was seen on all plains' cottages. According to Karp (1966),

The house carpenter was a man of the hammer and saw. If the exterior of the house was to be graced with ornament it would have to be something the carpenter could make with his saw and could hammer into place with a few good nails (p. 5).

The plains' cottage built by Paulser William O'Neal was different from every other cottage, yet typical of many built in Oklahoma around 1900 (Figures 16 and 17). O'Neal,



Figure 16. O'Neal Plains' Cottage

a carpenter and preacher, moved his family to Kitty, Indian Territory, from Missouri in 1904. Paulser, his wife Rosetta Crim, and their children, Alvin, Fayette, Leola Violet, George, and Sara, lived in the home of Paulser's brother while Paulser built their home in the center of the community which became Clarita, in Coal County, Oklahoma.

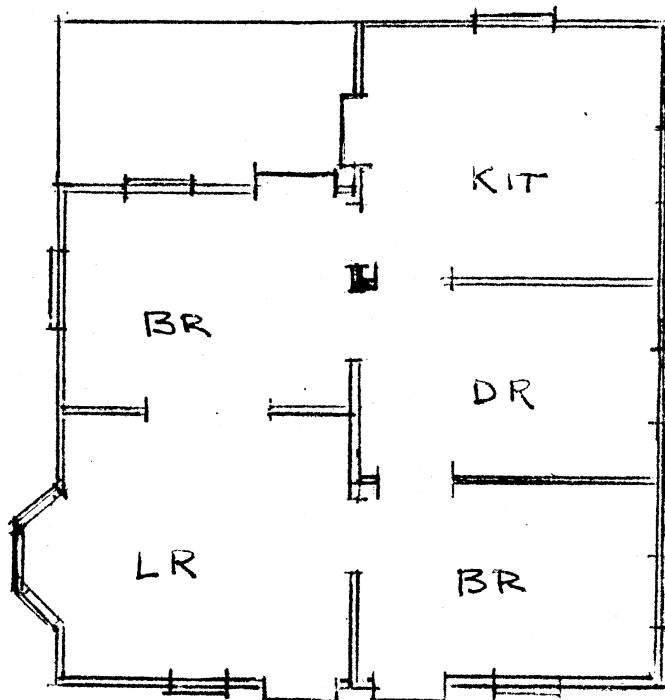


Figure 17. Floor Plan, O'Neal Plains' Cottage

The 25 feet by 27 feet house he built (Figures 16 and 17) was a plains' cottage of frame construction, using dimensioned lumber brought by train to Coalgate, then by wagon to Kitty. The foundation and chimney were of local stone. It had a wood shingled hip roof with four pedimented dormers with Queen Anne type windows of leaded panes of stained glass. There was a bay window in the parlor. All of the windows, with the exception of those in the dormers, were long, narrow, wooden-hung sash windows.

The front porch extended past two windows and two front doors, one with a transom. There was a corner porch off the kitchen in the rear of the house. The porches had wooden floors and turned posts of standard millwork. The clapboard house had five rooms, plus an attic used for a sleeping room for the sons of the family.

The structure was painted a dark green with white or cream colored trim. There was decorative barge board infill in each dormer and at the corners and posts of the porches. Gottfried (Personal Interview, 1980) states that the brackets were quite possibly handmade by scroll-saw. They were probably made, as was the house, as an example of the work which O'Neal could do for other people. Assembling the prefabricated parts and then decorating the house with sawn work and paint gave charm to the house. He outlined the shapes to add trim to the house. O'Neal brought financial resources with him, as evidenced by the

use of extensive trim and two front doors, according to Gottfried (1980).

Paulser O'Neal was the ancestor of a family of teachers and preachers who grew up in a home with books to read and parents who wanted them to be well educated. He also wanted as fine a home as he could give them. He finished the interior of the house with wallpaper and stained and varnished woodwork. The furnishings included a cast iron cookstove, safe, and work table in the kitchen. The dining room contained a round oak table and chairs, and built-in cabinets with glass doors. Iron bedsteads and oak dressers furnished the bedrooms. Rocking chairs, a library table, a heating stove, and sofa were in the parlor. Descendants of Paulser lived in the house until the 1940s, and the house stood until destroyed by fire in the late 1970s.

O'Neal built his house using the advanced technology of the early 1900s. He made a housing decision based on financial and natural resources, influenced by his middle-class background and family needs as he perceived them.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY

Although using the same criteria in deciding what type of dwelling to build, pioneers in the territories which became Oklahoma built different types of shelter. Each person considered his economic and natural resources, his needs and abilities, and then made the decision to construct a building based on these factors. The choice of house construction varied as greatly as the pioneers themselves.

The oldest houses discussed in this study were those built by the relocated Cherokees and Choctaws who constructed the ante-bellum houses modeled on their plantations in the states to the southeast. Their cultural background, ready labor force of slaves, and financial resources made the elaborate houses feasible. They were forced to relocate and moved their way of life to Indian Territory as they moved their families, their possessions, and their slaves. The transfer was not the choice of the tribesmen.

George M. Murrell build Hunter's Home in 1844 when it was difficult and expensive to import materials. Although lumber was plentiful on his land, much of that used in his

house was imported. The wrought iron hardware and iridescent glass window panes were imported from England. The lovely Greek Revival house rivaled others in Georgia and Mississippi. All 10 rooms of the mansion were beautifully finished with beveled or grooved woodwork, wallpaper, and ornate chandeliers. The furniture was brought from New Orleans and France. The high ceilings and two stories made it easier to stay cool in the hot summertime, while eight fireplaces provided heat for winter.

Murrell used his slave labor to build a house that reflected the gracious style of living he brought from his native Virginia. The size and details of the house showed his wealth and cultural background. Though the planters and merchants who built the plantation homes were "removed" to Indian Territory, they made the best of frontier life.

Today, as in 1844, the cost of construction materials and labor would limit the number of families who could build a 10 room house with high ceilings. The kinds of lumber used in Hunter's Home can be bought today, but the hand work used to finish it cannot because there are few people who know how or care to do the painstaking work. Even in the South, people no longer live as the Murrells lived.

Those pioneers who followed David Payne in trying to force Congress to open the "Unassigned Lands" knew they, in all probability, would be moved back into Kansas by the

United States Army and built their dugouts as temporary homes. The Boomers, as a whole, were trying to better their way of life, not merely transfer from one area to another. They needed shelter for the present and had to erect something quickly. Even if their finances permitted a more permanent structure, they knew how temporary their stay was until the law permitted permanent settlement.

The contrast between the dugout and the ante-bellum house was startling. At first, one might think the dugout must predate Hunter's Home, but the dugouts were actually used about 30 to 35 years later. These dwellings had one room and often a tent or wagon bed supplemented them. They were ugly and primitive but they provided shelter. The properties of insulation which an underground space provides were pleasant surprises for dugout dwellers. They were cool in summer and easy to heat in winter. The half-dugout was more permanent and was sometimes inhabited for a number of years, until time and money permitted the building of a more conventional house.

The pioneer shared some of the problems which concern the builders of one of the newest and most publicized type of house today, the underground or subterranean house. The energy crisis has caused the re-evaluation of the insulation properties of the earth shelter. Solutions to problems of moisture and lack of light are being sought.

Western Oklahoma, with a lower rainfall average, is more apt to see houses of this type than eastern Oklahoma.

The pioneers who made the runs to homesteads were men and women who chose to move to make a better life for their families. Historically, they were people of limited financial resources and were descendants of people who had settled other frontiers a few generations back. While they lived in soddies or in log cabins, they showed their concern for improving their position in life by replacing these houses as soon as finances permitted. These were people who used the natural resources of the land to the best of their ability to provide an improved quality of life for their children.

The biggest differences between the dugout and the next two housing types, the soddie and the log cabin, are the size and permanence. They were built for longer habitation and took more skill to construct. The sod house built by McCully in 1894 had two rooms, sod walls and roof, and a dirt floor. He broke the buffalo grass sod into slabs 16" x 36" x 6" and stacked them as a mason stacked bricks. The walls were 36" thick and provided very good insulation. The interior walls were plastered with a clay-like material from the nearby Eagle Chief Creek alkali beds which gave a smooth finish. The furnishings included only the most necessary items. The dry, sunny climate helped to extend the life of the soddies, which were easily constructed with available materials.

The roofs were of sod or wood shingles, if the owner could afford them.

The readily available trees in Indian Territory caused the construction of many log cabins such as the one built by Sam Kerr in 1895 in the Cherokee Nation. The cabin is 14 feet square and the only opening is the door facing south. The fireplace is in the east wall. Some time later Kerr added a plank floor, a lean-to, and a porch. As in most frontier homes, the sons slept in the loft. The lack of windows helped the family to stay warm in winter, but the summer heat was probably a problem.

While the sod house is a thing of the past because the plains of buffalo grass are now planted in wheat, this is not true of the log cabin. Log houses are being built in this country today as people learn or remember the insulation properties of the logs which also require less finish than a house of frame construction. Nostalgia may also be a factor. Lumber is a crop now, and few people can fell the logs on their property.

The families who moved into the Territories around 1900 did not face the problems of the earlier pioneers. They moved into established communities and had the option, if finances permitted, of buying millwork lumber and building houses similar to the ones they had left. Although most were not wealthy, the industrial revolution gave them a chance to enjoy some of the conveniences which only those with large financial resources had known in the past.

The plains' cottage built by P. W. O'Neal in 1904 was typical of those throughout the area west of the Mississippi River and east of the Continental Divide. It is the only house studied which shows the effect of the Industrial Revolution. The house was built entirely of wood, with the exception of the foundation and chimney, which were of native stone. The individual touch of the owner-carpenter showed in the trim and brackets on the porch and gables. The porch posts and interior millwork were typical of those ordered from catalogs and used in houses built from 1890 to 1910. The many windows were expensive, but this added expense insured added coolness for summer, but greater difficulty to heat in the winter.

The factors involved in deciding what type of house to build today are much the same as those considered by the settlers in the Territories. Then, as now, many people failed to weigh consciously these factors, but those who did provided better shelter than those who did not. The climate, financial and natural resources, family needs and cultural background are factors which each family should consider before deciding on the type of house to build.

Recommendations for further study include a detailed investigation of household furnishings of the pioneers, including those moved by them, as well as those purchased and made in the home. Another topic is a dual

study of the home and the family and their effect on each other. This could be a cooperative study in housing and family development.

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