

Construction of sod houses

Section 19, Pages 541 - 570

This collection consists of correspondence, plans, and specifications on the construction of sod houses. In 1932, the Kansas State Historical Society put out a call for information about and instructions on constructing a sod house, in order to create one in the museum when it was located at the Memorial Building in Topeka. The collection includes all correspondence received from this request, handwritten and typed reminiscences from around the country from men who built and lived in sod houses, as well as some of the standardized responses sent by the Society's secretary.

Date: 1932

Callnumber: Kansas State Historical Society, Sod Houses, Plans and Specifications on Construction, Boxes 1-2

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KANSAS
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

Construction of sod houses



Construction of sod houses

FRED FAUTH
MASTER WORKMAN

Ans Answered May 25, '32

MARY MORROW
RECORDER

ANCIENT ORDER OF UNITED WORKMEN

OFFICE OF
THE RECORDER



GLENDALE
LODGE NO. 2

P. O. BOX 855

GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA May 21-1932

Mr. Kirk Mechem,
Topeka, Kan.

Dear Sir:-

Having read the inclosed item in the Glendale News-Press, I am taking the liberty of writting you on the subject, having lived in one of those sod houses when a child.

From the item, I take it that you are under the impression that they were built above the ground; as a matter of fact, they were mostly under the ground.

The earth was dug out the depth required, leveled off for the floor, and thomoughly tamped down, wet down and again tamped down, to make it solid.

As for the walls, they were not over two feet above the ground; then there were poles laid for the roof, rather close together, and grass was placed over the poles, and earth over that, after which the sod was placed on the roof; if I recall rightly, the sod was cut in the early summer, at the grass was at its best growth, and carefully laid, and for a time it was kept as moist as water conditions would allow, till it started to take root, when it was considered completed.

You ask if they were plastered; some of the more pretentious were plastered with a mud made of clay, mor for the purpose of warmth in winter than for looks, but for the most part, they were not plastered.

The doors were made of rough boards, and some of them were indeed crude affairs, and there were no windows.

This is a rather rough sketch of the sod house, but it may be of some use to you, and I would like to hear from you as to your progress in your endeavor.

Respectfully;

(Ans) *Mary R. Morrow*



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San Antonio, Texas,
June 2, 1932.

Mr. Kirk Mechem,
Secretary of Kansas State Historical Society,
Topeka, Kansas.

Dear Sir:-

In answer to the clipping inclosed, I would suggest that you get in touch with Mrs. John Jones, a very old lady in Spivey Kansas. She lived in what we classed a dug-out on the prairie near Spivey not too long ago, and I think the dug-out(so-called) is still there, or a portion of it .

Also Mr. Oscar Cook, a younger man, but I think his family lived in the same kind of house and he may be able to tell you something about the sod houses.

Yours truly,

Mrs. D.C. Millingar

Mrs. D.C. Millingar,
1710 West Summitt,
San Antonio, Texas.

Construction of sod houses

April 9, 1932

Mr. W. S. Murray,
Elkhart, Kansas.

Dear Mr. Murray:-

We received so many responses to our request for information about the construction of sod houses that it was impossible to answer them all immediately. In behalf of the Historical Society I want to thank you for your letter and for the information it contained.

Persons living in all parts of the country-- from New York to California and from Michigan to Texas-- have responded with detailed instructions. So widespread an interest has convinced us that a sod house in our museum will be a unique historical exhibit and will attract hundreds of visitors. The principal difficulty is to secure a sod that will withstand several handlings and the necessary trucking. There is no scarcity of men who know how to do the work; in Topeka alone there are eight or ten who have built and lived in sod houses. If we can obtain suitable sod we expect to have the house ready for inspection by Fall.

I want to thank you again for your interest and to invite you to visit the museum whenever you are in this locality.

Sincerely yours,

Secretary

Construction of sod houses

Elkhart, Morton County, Kans March 18-1932
 Mr Kirk Blechem
 Secretary State Historical Society of Kansas
 I see by the Dodge City Daily Globe
 you are Planning to build a Typical Frontiers
 Sod house. Now as I have built some 15
 or 20 Sod houses & dugouts, I think I can
 give you valuable information on that line
 some of these houses are still Standing over 20 years
 I am sending you a Picture of a Sod School house
 I built over 22 years ago, of course this house is not
 Standing any more, was not Properly Cared for
 the size of this building is 18 x 24 feet inside
 walls were 16 inches thick and 9 feet high.
 the sod is ^{out} 3 1/2 inches thick, and 8 inches wide
 cut with a sod cutter made for that Purpose,
 Pulled by 4 horses, and cut 16 inches long.
 Cut when sod is moist and dried before handling
 I dont know if there any better than buffalo sod
 or not but this is good out here, it should be
 layed up in mud on a cement Foundation
 I have built a number of this kind all on top of
 ground. one 24 x 24 ft inside measure 8 ft high
 with 8 windows and 2 out side doors, 4 rooms inside,
 one 2 room with 5 windowe 2 out side doors cement
 floor, cement Plaster on inside walls. (Still standing)
 (at first we used Gypsum Plaster.)
 Cover with Rubberoid roofing and 3 inches of sod
 on top of that, (sod should be cut in august.)

Construction of sod houses

Then when I came to this County 25 years
I built a Part dugout 2 feet deep and 5 ft on
top of ground built of sod. walls were 22 inches
thick Cement floor Plastered walls with Gypsum
2 room. This house 18x32 ft inside measure. 10 windows
and 1 out side door 2 cement floors. covered with
Tar Paper and 3 inches of sod on top of that. was
cool in summer and warm in winter. These were
among the best of sod houses in the country.
we lived in this house 11 years and it was good
yet when I sold out. I have lived in Kansas since
in april 1870. (Born in Illinois - 1863.
worked at Carpentering for 35 or 40 years)
if any of these houses interests you I will
draw a Plan of any of them. and I could rebuild
any of them.

yours Truly
W. S. Murray
Box 192. Elkhart
Kans

Construction of sod houses

Ans

E. L. MORRIS, #865 FAIRVIEW

PARKERSBURG, W. VA.

May 29 - 32

Mr Kirk Meehens

Dear Sir

it is with much interest I read
in WASH. H.C. Paper about you &
your desire to build a Sod House
it reminds my thoughts back to 1873
when I watched my Father build a Big
one about 6 miles west of Central City
Neb. (then Lone Tree)

I believe I could give a lot of good in-
formation on the Building of such
a House. if you are interested I would
be glad to hear from you.

and if I can not tell you How, I can
come & show you how it is done.

Yours truly, E. L. Morris

Answered June 2, 1932



ms / Stockton N.J.
July - 10 - 1932.
Answered July 13, 1932
Mr. Kirk Meehem.
Dear Sir.
I saw a notice in the Fredonia
Banner that you wanted to
know how to build a sod
house for the Kansas State
Historical Society. I lived in
a sod house about 44 years
ago and have seen them build.
I also talk with my mother
the other day and we could give
you a lot of help. We lived in
Graham Co. Kansas in a sod
house for 7 years I think we
lived in a house just like the
one you would like to build.
I think it was about 58 years
ago when my Father & Mother went
west and took up Government
over



land. Now If you want
any help I would be glad to help
you.

Yours Truly

W. H. Norton
Stockton
Chautauque Co. N. Y.

Construction of sod houses

April 18, 1932

Mr. Harold Norris,
Cold Spring, Kentucky.

Dear Mr. Norris-

In behalf of the Historical Society I want to thank you for your letter of April 15 in response to our request for information about the construction of sod houses.

Persons living in all parts of the country-- from New York to California and from Canada to Texas-- have responded with detailed instructions. So widespread an interest has convinced us that a sod house in our museum will be a unique historical exhibit and will attract hundreds of visitors. The principal difficulty is to secure a sod that will withstand several handlings and the necessary trucking. There is no scarcity of men who know how to do the work; in Topeka alone there are eight or ten who have built and lived in sod houses. If we can obtain suitable sod we expect to have the house ready for inspection by Fall.

I want to thank you again for your interest and to invite you to visit the museum whenever you are in this locality.

Sincerely yours,

Secretary



Kirk Mechem,
Secretary, Kansas State Historical
Society.,
Topeka, Kansas.

April, 15. 1932
Cold Spring, Ky.
R.F.D.# 2.

Dear Sir:-

This evening while reading The Cincinnati Post
I found your write up about the (sod house) if you wish
information regarding this subject, I can furnish all
the information you would want to know about the sod house,
(My Father once lived in one) On the western Plains.

If you are interested, just what would this information
be worth to you.

Sincerely, Yours

Harold Norris.

Construction of sod houses

April 9, 1932

Mr. George A. Newlin Sr.,
Cambridge, Arizona.

Dear Mr. Newlin-

We received so many responses to our request for information about the construction of sod houses that it was impossible to answer them all immediately. In behalf of the Historical Society I want to thank you for your letter and for the information it contained.

Persons living in all parts of the country-- from New York to California and from Michigan to Texas-- have responded with detailed instructions. So widespread an interest has convinced us that a sod house in our museum will be a unique historical exhibit and will attract hundreds of visitors. The principal difficulty is to secure a sod that will withstand several handlings and the necessary trucking. There is no scarcity of men who know how to do the work; in Topeka alone there are eight or ten who have built and lived in sod houses. If we can obtain suitable sod we expect to have the house ready for inspection by Fall.

I want to thank you again for your interest and to invite you to visit the museum whenever you are in this locality.

Sincerely yours,

Secretary



Coolidge Arizona
April 2, 1932.

Mr. Kirk Mechem -
Topeka Kansas.

Dear Sir -

I read of your search for
some one knowing about sod
houses. If you are still interested,
I would be glad to tell you how
they are built - I have built them
Sincerely Yours.

George A. Newlin Sr.
Coolidge Arizona
Box 1301

Ans

Terre Haute, Ind, 5/23/32
1240 Lafayette ave.

Mr Kirk Mechem

Topeka Kas. Ans. May 24, 1932

Dear Sir: - I read an article in the paper that you could not find a man that can build a sod house will say that when I was a young man just 21 in 1884 I located a preemption claim in Comanche Co., Kas on the Salt Fork river 9 miles South of Neosho -

I built my own sod house and then helped to build about 20 more for other settlers.

I am still an active man and am sure I can build a good sod house today - if you are not faking write me I might come out and build one for you

yours respy

Edgar E. Parrett

P.S. I also taught my first school there.

E.E.P.



Ans
with ps

ans. May 23, 32

Dear Sir

I read in the papers a week or so ago that you were hunting for someone to tell you how to build a sod house.

I then when I read it again today I could not help but write to you.

I believe I can tell you about all there is to know as I helped cut and lay sod for houses barns and chicken houses and was born in one myself

Construction of sod houses

In the first place you
pick a level place or
make one the size you
want your house to be.
Then pick a good
soddy piece of ground
with a little clay in it
so that it will not
crumble too easily
when it dries. If the
grass is long cut it off.
Then get you a good
wide breaking plow
and set it as wide
as it will go. (The old
soddies had walls any
where from 16 inches to
two foot thick.

Construction of sod houses

Set your plow at about
a three inch depth and
commence. you can test
your sod to see if it
is too thick by rubbing
the dirt off of the under
side and see if it is
full of roots as it
has to have roots
to hold it together so
dont plow below the
roots.

Turn plenty of sod
over to make a house.
I cant tell you how
much as I dont know
the size of the house or
how many inner

Construction of sod houses

walls you are planning
Make the outline of
of your house with
inner walls marked
out. Now take some
good sharp spades
and go Cut your sod
in lengths of about 2
and 3 feet the length
is not important and
can vary to all lengths
but look out for rattlers
as that sod is a fine
place for them.
Start laying your
sod just like you
would lay brick. break
ing all joints

Construction of sod houses

Set stakes at the corners
and use Chalk lines to
keep the walls straight
and always lay your
corners first and work
from the corners.
Now the windows are
up to you as the old
original soddie had
no glass but either
had a board shutter
or doors that could
be taken out in the
summer time or else
they had a piece of
waxed paper or cloth
stretched on a frame.
In my time they

had glass and only used cloth over the store room or milk room if they did not have a cage.

So it all depends on what you use for windows as you start your glass windows pretty low but the paper or cloth windows are about waist high.

If you use glass windows you set in your frames about 20 inches off of the ground, and lay your

Construction of sod houses

sod up again, then
so as to make a snug
fit.

The door frames are
set in and braced
when you start from
the ground or at the
level your floor will
be as only the best had
any floor in them.

The window and door
frames are set back
about two or three
inches from the out
side of the wall.

When you get to the
level with the tops of
windows and doors

you lay in a piece of
good wide timber to
supp ort the sod over
the windows.

The walls were usually
carried to about 7 or 8
feet what ever the
owner thought was
right as there was
plenty of sod and
many arguements went
on as to how high to
build it.

After the walls were
high enough the ends
were built up to a peak
of what ever pitch was
desired. I believe about

Construction of sod houses

20 degrees was considered a good pitch.

Then the rafters, usually made out of poles were cut and placed with plenty of braces.

Then brush and hay or straw was laid and leveled down well then two layers of sod over the whole roof.

If the settler wanted a fire place it had to be built on the outside and go up with the end wall so that the sod chimney went up at the exact peak.

Construction of sod houses

although there was not many of these in my time. The idea seemed to be that the fire place had to be lined with a mixture of clay and cow manure. Why this was I do not know.

Now take your spades and shave the inside walls and square them up, chink up around the windows and doors. Then lay the floor, if there is to be a floor.

Lay the sills and block them even and fit the floor close to the walls.

Construction of sod houses

after the floor is laid
if the settler had any
money to spare he
plastered it in the
earlier days this was
done with clay and
straw with a finish
coat of clay but later
they used a lime and
sand plaster.

Some of them used
sugar in the lime as
it would not rub off
so easily. I don't know
what part sugar was
used.

Now put in the base
board or mop board

Construction of sod houses

and the house is ready.
You will bind big
wide double windows
in the front room
with plenty of room
for the house plants.
I think that I have
covered every thing
except the rats had
a habit of making
holes through the
walls and old shep
used to dig through
after them now and
then.
This is just to help
you out if you can
use it. If not



think that you could
go out in the northern
part of nebraska and
find some old soddies
yet or some one to
build them for you.
I have lived in kansas
but dont remember ever
seeing a sod house there
Hoping this will
aid you in the
Construction of
the Soddie.
Yours Respectfully
James E Patchin
1606 N 54th
Seattle Wash



April 19, 1932

Mr. Lem Pogue,
Dodge City, Kansas.

Dear Mr. Pogue-

Thank you for your letter of April 18.

I don't know whether we shall be able to get
at the sod house before August. If we can locate a
good sod near here we can begin the work almost any
time.

With best wishes

Sincerely yours,

Secretary

Construction of sod houses

Dodge City Kans.,
4-18-1932,

Mr Kirk Mechem.

Topeka Kans.

Dear Mr Mechem.

Replying to your letter of the 13th

My opinion is that good sod
is hard to find any where now.
In the early days, the prairie fires kept the
ground from getting heavily coated with grass,
and in the years when there was a great
number of stock pasturing in the country
they kept the grass short - which kept the grass
roots, and consequently the sod, from rotting.
You cannot get good sod where there has been
a heavy coat of grass.

The best place to get the sod is along the edge
of a draw where the buffalo and bluestem
grasses are mixed - and the best time
to get it is just before a dry spell.
If the sod can be plowed while it is wet, and
allowed to lay and thoroughly dry out, it
will handle better and last much longer
in a wall. It helps a great deal to handle
the sod on short boards, you do not break it
so badly - some people seem to think it is a wonder-
ful thing, to build a sod wall - but there are hundreds of
people yet living who can do it. Sincerely Yours - Lem Pogue.



April 15, 1932

Mr. Lem Pogue,
Dodge City, Kansas.

Dear Mr. Pogue-

Please accept my thanks for your letter of
April 11.

The Topeka Capital carried a story about our
proposal to build a sod house. It was picked up
by the Associated Press and by the United Press.
The United Press story made it appear that there is
no one in Kansas who knows how to build a sod house.
As a result, I have received over seventy letters
from all parts of the country containing detailed
instructions. As a matter of fact, there are eight
or ten men in Topeka who have built and lived in sod
houses and who are well qualified to construct one
for us.

Your letter is one of the best I have received
and I very much appreciate your time and trouble. The
principal difficulty now is to secure a sod that
will withstand three or four handlings and the nec-
essary trucking. I don't know whether we can find
a sod in this neighborhood that will answer our pur-
pose. I am told that the buffalo sod has deteriorated
in recent years. What is your opinion of getting a
goos sod? What is the best time of year to secure a
sod that will not rot and last longest.

Thanking you again and with best wishes

Sincerely yours,

Secretary