

*Living in a Sod House
Versus
Living in a Wood-Framed House*

Living in a Sod House

The experience of Gertrude Sewell Pate, daughter of Red Willow County homesteaders, 1879-1890.

"The walls of our house were plastered and whitewashed. Mother sewed strips of white muslin together (by hand, since there were no sewing machines in those days), which were tacked on the ceiling to keep insects and dirt from falling. It also concealed the unsightly logs, making the room clean, light, and attractive. The fireplace built in the wall added to the cheerfulness of the room. Guests enjoyed it with us many evenings as the wood fire crackled and shone brightly.

"The small oval-shaped stove was a combined heater and cook stove. The dish cupboard was made by Mother of boards, and had a board door. A large mirror, a large, sweet-toned striking clock with weights, and a pretty canary bird's singing helped to brighten the home.

"For a short time we used floor beds. Straw ticks were filled with straw and placed on the floor in two corners. Wagon-bed sides and end boards were used for the sides and feet of our beds.

"Our table was small. We had but few chairs, one a rocking chair.

"When company came to our house, we children had to stand up when indoors. This was the necessity at all early settler's homes because of the scarcity of chairs.

"We even had to eat dinner standing up and always did we children eat at the second table. But there was always plenty of good food left for us. Father made Flora and me each a little chair out of small tobacco boxes. How proud of them we were. They were painted so beautifully. A small bench held a water pail and dipper, a wash pan and soap. The water never froze in our sod house which was warm in winter and cool in summer.

"Grease lamps were in common use. Grease was put in a dish. In it the end of a cloth was put; the other end of the cloth was lighted. The heat drew the grease up into the cloth which lighted the room. Skunk grease was preferable to others since it did not harden.

"Some old-time settlers used candles; a few having their own molds with which to mold them.

"An essential piece of equipment was a fly swatter. Although we had mosquito netting on our windows, some flies persisted in coming into the house. Not many homesteaders had their windows covered. It was a common sight to see home-makers shooing the flies out of the room by waving a large cloth around the room. Fly swatters were made by folding a newspaper with a few thicknesses over a stick then cutting it into narrow strips as a sort of fringe. This implement was not used to actually swat flies, but was waved gently over the dinner table to keep flies off the food. Since newspapers were so scarce, paper fly swatters were luxuries. Small leafy tree twigs were used."

From Gertrude Sewell Pate's account entitled "Homesteading When I was a Little Girl." pp. 10-12. 921-P295

Living in a Wood-Framed House

The experience of Ada Gray Bemis (Mrs. George Whitfield Bemis), early Sutton resident, 1871-74.

"My own first home was of lumber hauled in a wagon from Lincoln, about 12x24 feet. Two rooms, no foundation, with real windows and doors. Made of boards, covered with tar paper and ceiled. Later my husband was in Lincoln and found some wall paper, each roll different. He promptly bought the entire stock and put it on in panels, there not being enough of any one kind to cover a whole side of a room. After that, whenever we had nothing else to do, we made paste of flour and water and covered cracks where it peeled from the boards.

"Our furniture was brought from Iowa in a wagon and consisted of a very few pieces of black walnut, the kitchen table . . . I sat up at night to admire the set of corner shelves made by Mr. Bemis to hold my wedding vases, books, and the ever present sea shells, and glass covered wax flowers. He also evolved a clock shelf which he put on the wall so high that each day he must stand on a chair to wind it but while he grumbled throughout the process, he never moved the shelf.

"Just once in my life I had made a quilt, a crazy quilt, of small bits of silk, satin and velvet, and this I ripped apart, and cushioned, draped, and covered everything possible with its fragments. The color scheme in our home blended perfectly. We did not pay any bills for electricity or gas the whole time we lived there as our two kerosene lamps and a lantern were ample when supplemented by tallow candles which I molded for emergencies.

"We had real floors but the new lumber soon had open cracks between the boards, and after I had seen a snake crawl under the house one day, we covered the floor with straw and then laid a yarn carpet sent from the east by my father.

"Later we shipped out my piano and its great square rosewood case filled more room than we could well spare but since when company arrived we filled a tick with straw and slept on the floor, giving the guests the bed in the recess behind the curtains, we did not miss the bed room space, but rather liked the little corner under the piano. Often our hospitality was limited only by the size of our floor space as travelers came driving by, all of whom were welcomed to rest for a day or night. . . .

"When the town did not have any kerosene as occasionally happened, and our candles gave out, I put a saucer full of lard on the table, with a stick wound with strips of cotton cloth in it, and this form of indirect lighting was very satisfactory. We set the stick in a piece of dough made of flour and water.

"I remember my first dinner party was lighted that way and I felt as you would now if the electric lights went out on your dinner. But, we had on the table a haunch of venison, a plover on each plate, fresh vegetables, dried red raspberry pie and home-made cheese and conversation which rivaled any I have heard lately."

From Ada Gray Bemis ((Mrs. George Whitfield Bemis)' account in the "Nebraska History Quarterly," volume 14, pp. 211-218 978.2-H62m-14:209-219.