



Grade 4 Harvesting Demonstration Resource:

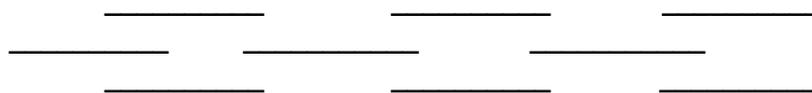
The Sod House

There are many recollections of the sod hut or soddy as it was known. No two were alike, nor were the experiences among them. The points that are mentioned below are only a handful of the experiences that settlers dealt with. Possibly you can brainstorm for some of your own.

Upon arrival to the area of land where the settlers were going to live, the area for the barn and the house were chosen. Prior to building a cellar was probably dug below the kitchen area. A cellar is an area used to keep food cold in the summer. In winter it was warm enough to prevent food items from freezing. Some cellars were seven feet deep and ten feet square. Often, there was a ladder under a trap door which led down to the cellar.

Sod is the grass covered surface of the ground. It was often a combination of grass forb (a mixture of herb growing grains) found readily near a slough. The sod was cut from furrows pulled from plough-driven horses. The sod was then chopped apart with an axe. Wagon loads were hauled to the building site or carried by hand if need be. The sod was best laid when wet in order to prevent crumbling. The roots of the grass would continue to grow knitting the remaining sod together and tightening the walls.

The first tier of sod was laid to define the dimensions of the building. This layer was then levelled with chunks of dirt forced into the existing cracks. The pattern was repeated but in a different order. See example below.



This patterning aided to the sturdiness. Existing joints were then covered to further prevent rodents and snakes from entering in. Once the wall was two feet high, the spaces for the windows (if windows were an option) and door were skipped – but the wall on either side of the window and door area would be built up 6-8 feet.

Then came the trip to gather poplars or willow tree trunks. The branches of the tree were trimmed and saved for firewood. The small poplar poles were laid across the top of all window openings and doorways – tucked approximately 12 inches into the sod walls. Tar paper was laid over these poles and the sod continued to a height of 8-9 feet in the middle.



“These roofs were strong enough to support a neighbour’s cow when it ran up the slanting end of their hay stack, jumped to the sod barn roof and ran the length of it before they could get her down; there was no damage.”¹

The roof was also of sod layered over a thickness of uncultivated slough hay with a large amount of clay over all the joints in the sod. The hay was laid next to the poles to decrease the dust. If the sod wall settled away from the roof or other areas; the openings were stuffed with rags and paper. Shingles on the roof were coined *government shingles* – that is poles close together covered with hay and sod, hay and dirt.

Once the work was completed the dirt that was thrown out of the building (example: cellar) was banked against the walls. The banking provided steadiness, wind-proofed it and aided in the drainage away from the walls.

An example of a single room sod hut housing a family of four or more is as follows. A bunk bed was in the corner – parents on the bottom and the children on the top. The cook stove stood against the wall often with a space behind to stack the wood. Walls were covered with building paper, cheesecloth, wallpaper and newspaper.

“The cheesecloth on walls and ceilings was a welcome improvement from the earlier days when curtains were the only room dividers. It cut down considerably on the number of insects, especially the little centipedes (thousand-legged worms we call them) that were always dropping on and into things.”²

The sod house was the staple dwelling of the homesteader. They were inexpensive, warm in winter and cool in summer. Sod schools as well as churches were built as well.

¹ Pg.9 Evelyn Slater McLeod “*Printing houses made warm home*”, Western People, January 8, 1987. Pg. WP8.

² Ibid.