



The Mini Page

Betty Debnam, Founding Editor and Editor at Large

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More Than a Mudroom ...

Home, Sweet Sod Home

Are flowers and grass growing from your roof and walls this summer? If you were a child of pioneers in the 1850s and 1860s, seeing plants grow from your house would have been normal.

Many settlers in Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas built their houses out of **sod**, or dirt with grass growing in it. The strong grass roots held the dirt together, even after it was dug up.

Because plant roots were left in the sod, new growth sprouted each spring. Families even sent away for new flower seeds to plant on their roofs.

Why build with dirt?

On the prairie, there was little else to build with. There were almost no stones close to the surface. The few trees that grew nearby were not good for building. Settlers might have to travel as much as 40 miles to find wood suitable for construction.

The special clay used to make bricks was rare on the prairie. Even when they could find clay, settlers didn't have enough wood for the fires needed to make bricks.

Even schools and churches were made of sod!



photo by Solomon Butcher, courtesy Library of Congress

Many settlers began with a dugout, a kind of cave dug out of a hill. Often they used the hillside as the back wall when they built their sod house.

The family's cow is not standing on the roof, but on the hill making up the back wall.

Photographer Solomon Butcher took this photo of the Rawding family in Custer County, Nebraska.

Building a sod house

Settlers, or "sodbusters," cut only as much sod as they could build with in a day. Leftover sod dried out too much for building.

To build a sod house, or "soddie," settlers had to:

- Mow the grass.
- Cut pieces of sod, or "bricks," with a horse-drawn plow called a grasshopper.
- Lay two layers of bricks lengthwise.



A close-up of sod bricks.

photo courtesy David Kravetz

- Lay a third layer crosswise. This crosswise brick pattern made the houses more stable.

- Leave openings for windows and doors in the sod walls.

- Put a ridgepole and rafters across the top to keep the ceiling up.

- Lay mounds of sod on top.

- Cover windows with paper greased with animal fat. This let some light in but kept the bugs out.

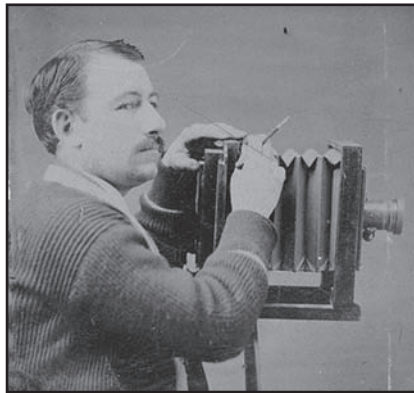
- Hang a blanket in the doorway.

Settlers would help new people build a house. Without help, it could take a week to build a one-room soddie.

One acre of sod was needed to make a one-room house.

Preserving History

Much of what we know about sod houses was learned from Solomon Butcher's photos and interviews with settlers. During a period of about 40 years, from 1884 through 1924, he took nearly 4,000 photographs of life in Nebraska.



Solomon Butcher (1856-1927) had a deep appreciation for the hardships facing courageous pioneers. The photo here is a self-portrait.

Butcher lived in Virginia until he was 4 and then moved to Illinois. Later he became an apprentice to a tintypist. **Tintype** was an early form of photography.

A winter on the plains

When he was 24, Butcher moved to Nebraska. In the 1860s, the U.S. government offered 160 acres to settlers who would plant a crop, build a house and live there for five years. Butcher made himself a dugout but stayed just one winter.

He moved to Minneapolis, where he studied medicine. There he met his wife, Lillie.

The Butchers moved back to Nebraska, where he taught school. He built a sod house and set up a photography studio.

Butcher had a special wagon with photo equipment. He drove this horse-drawn wagon over rough prairie trails in all sorts of weather. When he could, he earned a little money by selling the pictures he made to the pioneers.

Settlers lived so far apart that he could not get from farm to farm in one day. Often he had to sleep in the open or eat what he could find on the prairie.

Hard times

Butcher and his family faced many hard times. He lost the family farm. Then his studio burned down, and he lost much of his work, including most of his photographs and biographies of settlers. Fortunately, he was able to save most of the glass negatives.

Starting over

Butcher started again to record the biographies and take more photos. He succeeded in publishing a book of the photos and stories.

He opened a new photo studio and started making postcards. He tried other businesses, but these were not successful.

Although Butcher believed he was a failure at the time of his death, his photos have given him a special place in history. Today his collection is in the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Ready Resources



The Mini Page provides ideas for websites, books or other resources that will help you learn more about this week's topics.

On the Web:

- nebraskahistory.org
- amhistory.si.edu/ourstory/f/sodhouse.html

At the library:

- "The Long Winter" by Laura Ingalls Wilder
- "Square Against the World: The Story of a Sod House" by Cynthia Mercati
- "Sod Houses on the Great Plains" by Glen Rounds

Sod Home



Basset
Brown's

Try
'n'
Find

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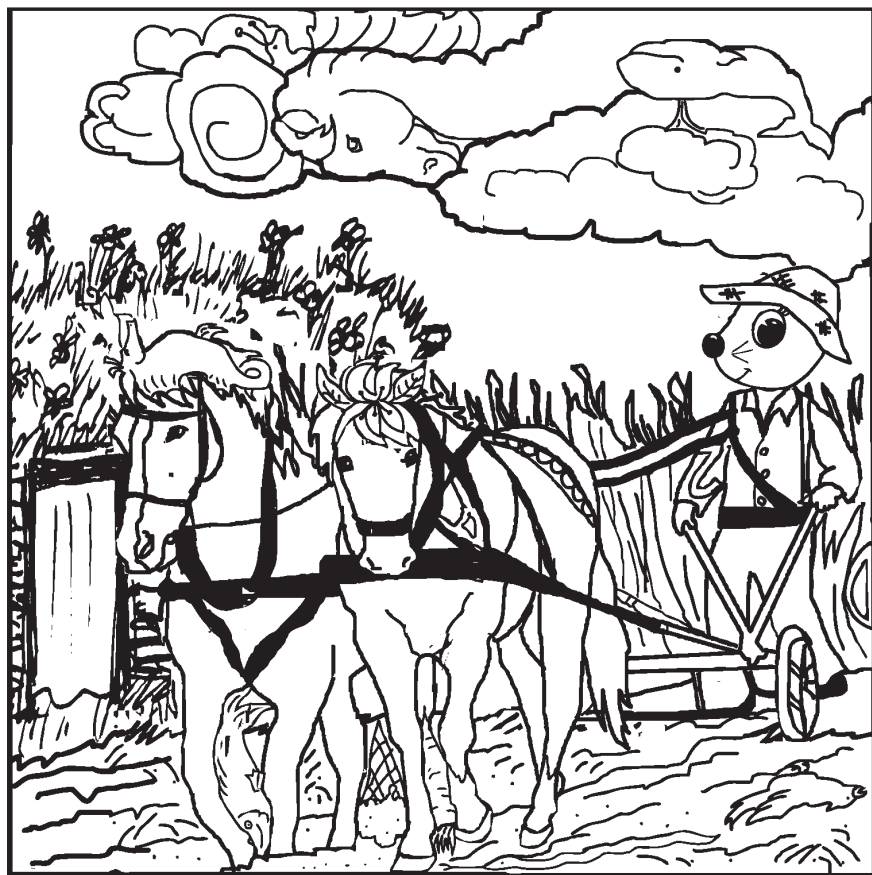
Words that remind us of sod houses are hidden in the block above. Some words are hidden backward or diagonally, and some letters are used twice. See if you can find: ACRE, BRICK, CLOTH, DIRT, FIRE, FLOOR, FLOWERS, GRASS, HOUSE, MOW, PHOTO, PLANTS, PRAIRIE, PROTECTION, RIDGEPole, ROOTS, SETTLERS, SODDIE, TALL, WALL, WIND, WOOD.



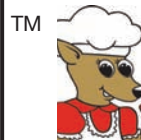
Mini Spy

Mini Spy is plowing near her sod house. See if you can find:

- | | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> number 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> flower | <input type="checkbox"/> horse head | <input type="checkbox"/> bird |
| <input type="checkbox"/> carrot | <input type="checkbox"/> whale | <input type="checkbox"/> letter D | <input type="checkbox"/> fish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sea horse | <input type="checkbox"/> letter A | <input type="checkbox"/> number 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> canoe |
| <input type="checkbox"/> snail | <input type="checkbox"/> pea pod | <input type="checkbox"/> ice cream cone | <input type="checkbox"/> snake |



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Rookie Cookie's Recipe Quick and Tasty Sugar Snap Peas

You'll need:

- 1 (8-ounce) package sugar snap peas
- 1 cup boiling water
- 1 tablespoon reduced-fat margarine or butter
- 1 tablespoon fresh-squeezed lemon juice
- 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon salt

What to do:

1. Wash the sugar snap peas and trim the ends.
 2. Bring one cup of water to boil.
 3. Add peas; boil for 3 minutes.
 4. Drain peas and rinse with cold water.
 5. Melt margarine or butter in microwave. Stir in lemon juice.
 6. Pour mixture over the peas. Sprinkle salt as desired. Serves 4.
- You will need an adult's help with this recipe.*

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Meet Kelly Donohue and Jon Babu



photo by Amy Chmara, Paperbird Photography

Singer/songwriter Kelly Donohue and her husband, drummer Jon Babu, are the bandleaders for Here Comes Trouble. Their first family album is "Goo on My Shoe."

Kelly and Jon both studied jazz and performed professionally after college. Then both became lawyers and began working in the legal profession in the Washington, D.C., area.

In 2010, Kelly and Jon discovered their kids didn't know anything about their parents' former musical careers. They wanted to bring more music back into their lives, so they formed their band.

Kelly began taking piano lessons when she was 7 and began singing when she was in college. Jon began taking guitar lessons when he was in second grade, but he got bored with practicing. Then he saw his school band play and fell in love with the drums. He, his brother and friends formed a band when they were in elementary school.

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Gus
Goodsport's
Supersport



Height: 6-5
Age: 23
Hometown:
Las Vegas,
Nevada

Kris Bryant

Baseball is a game of streaks, particularly for batters. A player on a hot streak gets hit after hit, while a slumping player can't seem to get on base. With 162 games to play in a major-league season, though, there's plenty of time for a big-leaguer to turn his fortunes around with grit and determination.

Chicago Cubs rookie Kris Bryant was called up to the majors on Friday, April 17. The second overall pick in the 2013 Major League Baseball Draft, Kris had dazzled players and fans in the minors and during spring training. But in his debut at famed Wrigley Field, Kris went 0-4 with three strikeouts.

The very next day, Kris was back in the lineup, getting on base five times and batting in a game-tying run. The following day, he knocked his first double. On May 9, Kris belted his first homer in the majors, and by May 12, he'd already pounded two more. Less than a month into his rookie season, Kris was riding his first hot streak!



Mighty Funny's Mini Jokes

All the following jokes have something in common. Can you guess the common theme or category?

Sally: How does a scarecrow drink milk?

Stuart: Through a straw!



Steve: What do scarecrows say to greet each other?

Sam: "Hay, friend!"

Solomon: Why don't scarecrows enjoy parties?

Simon: Because they're all stuffed shirts!



Life in a Soddie

The good ...

Sod houses were cozy in the winter. Heat from the fireplace stayed in the house, and the thick walls kept out the wind. In very bad winters, many settlers in wooden houses did not survive. People living in soddies stayed warm.

Although the heat from the cooking fires kept the houses warm in the summer too, the dirt walls helped keep the houses cooler than wooden homes.

Soddies were also much safer than wooden houses during tornadoes. Sometimes a tornado would tear off a roof, but the walls stayed up.

In the 1800s there were few trees or buildings to act as windbreaks on the prairie. The danger from high winds and tornadoes was even greater than today.

Soddies were lifesaving protection against fires. Fire from cooking stoves was not a big threat because dirt didn't burn.

However, prairie fires were very dangerous to anyone caught outside. If it was windy, fires spread quickly and were almost impossible to put out. One fire could sweep through hundreds of miles of grasslands, often moving faster than a running horse.

What is your house made of? How do you think your house's materials work better or worse than a sod house?

Next week, The Mini Page rolls over to the National Marbles Tournament.



photo by Solomon Butcher, courtesy Library of Congress

Photographer Solomon Butcher photographed the Semler family in Custer County, Nebraska, in 1886.

Proud homeowners usually posed for photos in front of their homes.

And the not so good ...

Snakes, bugs and globs of mud often dropped onto people's beds or food. In some places, rattlesnakes made their dens in the walls.

People slept, cooked and lived in one room. All their possessions would be crowded into that one room. In dry weather, settlers got more living space by moving their belongings outside. The outdoors became an extension of the house.

Sod houses leaked in the rain. People complained that the house would continue leaking for days after the rain stopped.

Housekeeping

To keep the dust down, women poured water over the floor about once a week. They would then smooth it out and have a new floor.

If they weren't lucky enough to live close to water, they might have to make several mile-long trips back and forth from a neighbor's well.

Getting better

At first settlers might cover the dirt walls with newspapers. Many whitewashed the walls to help control the dirt and make the dark house brighter.

They hung a big piece of cloth under the ceiling to catch dirt sprinkling down. Sometimes they used the canvas from the tops of their covered wagons.

When they had more time and money, they plastered over the walls and ceiling to keep dirt from falling. They put in wooden floors and roofs.

Most settlers wanted to live in a wooden house. They bought lumber and built new houses as soon as they could. The sod house became a toolshed, outhouse or chicken coop.

Although soddies were most popular in the mid-1800s, they were built as late as the 1930s, during the Depression, when many people were too poor to buy housing materials.

The Mini Page Staff

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