

Lesson 10: Pioneer Homes

Learning Goals:

Students will understand how the natural environment shaped the kinds of homes pioneers were able to build for themselves.

Students will understand how the homes of pioneer Iowans evolved and developed.

Iowa History Benchmarks:

4. Pioneer Life on the Prairie
 - c. For most settlers, living on the prairie meant a change in farming and household practices.
 - d. Pioneer raised or made most of the items they needed for daily life.
 - e. Pioneer families developed a sense of social community and interdependence by sharing work and social events.

Materials:

Getting Settled on the Iowa Frontier

Life in a Log Home

Ephraim G. Fairchild Builds a House

Building a Log Home

Building a Sod Home

Building an I-Type Home

Activities:

1. Prior to the beginning of class, partition off a 16' by 20' section of the classroom. This may be done by placing masking tape on the floor or by arranging classroom furniture accordingly.
2. Have students sit down within the space without relating what the partition stands for. Read to students *Getting Settled on the Iowa Frontier* by Sarah Nossaman and *Life in a Log Home* by Onieta Fisher. Discuss with students what it would be like to live in the small space of a log cabin. A very typical log cabin measured 16 feet by 20 feet.
3. Read to students the short selection from Ephraim G. Fairchild. Discussions questions:
 - What kind of house did Fairchild live in?
 - What kind of house did he want to live in?
 - How would he get the materials to build a new house?
 - What materials did he intend to buy?
 - What problems was he having in getting the materials for a new house?
4. Divide the class into three groups. To each distribute one of the information sheets on pioneer homes—Log Home, Sod Home, I-Type Home. For each type of house have groups create a chart as follows:

Type of home	Materials needed	Advantages	Disadvantages	Area of Iowa
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Log Home	Readily available timber logs	Inexpensive Could be made by the settler	Cold in the winter	Only in areas with supplies of timber
Sod Home	Natural grassy areas	Inexpensive Could be made by the settler. Warm in winter and cool in summer.	Dirty Roof often leaked Small animals lived in walls	NW corner where timber was scarce.
I-Type House	Milled lumber	Cleaner and warmer than other kinds of homes.	Expensive.	Anywhere that materials could be purchased.

- When each group has completed their work, bring the group back together to discuss their results.
- Conclude the lesson by developing a sequence chart identifying the development of settlers' homes.

Living in a wagon and a shanty made of poles covered with elm bark. Then....	...building a log home or....	...building a sod home. Then...	...building a home made from milled lumber such as the I-Type house.
			

GETTING SETTLED ON THE IOWA FRONTIER

By Sarah Nossaman

Sarah Welch Nossaman was born in 1825 in North Carolina. She moved with her family and settled in Iowa in 1831.

Sarah married Wellington Nossaman March 17, 1842. They were married near Fairfield where they lived the first year. In 1843 they moved from a rented farm near Fairfield to a land purchase four miles south of present-day Pella.

In the following paragraphs Sarah describes the temporary housing they used until they were able to build a log home in the fall of 1843.

In 1843, the new purchase being opened for settlement, your Uncle Levi and Aunt Caroline, your father and myself, with our babies then three months old, started to the new purchase. On May 17, 1843, we got to this part of God's footstool. We took a claim four miles south of where Pella now is. But when we got to our stopping place, our feelings can be better imagined than described, for there was not another family for fifty miles, no house, no nothing you might say...

...But we thought it was the only way we could get a home. We went to work and built a shanty made of poles and covered it with elm bark, not slippery elm, but what we called white elm, but the sun curled it so badly we had to have a new cover every few days, and then it was but little better than no roof. After we had been at our new home a few days, your Aunt Caroline and I went strolling out in the woods, and when we had gone about a mile from our shanty we heard the sound of an ax. We got back to the shanty as soon as we could to tell the good news to your uncle and father that there were surely white people not far away. We knew from the sound of the ax it was not an Indian. To our great joy we soon found it to be a camp of white men, but no women with them. We were not long getting acquainted and have remained warm friends ever since.

I will try to tell you of our first summer's stay up in this part of the wilderness. As I have told you we built a shanty in the thick timber four miles south of where Pella now stands, where we lived for five years, but not in the shanty, as we built a log cabin in the fall. When living in the shanty, we had no door or fireplace, so we could neither cook nor shut out the skunks nor snakes, and they were both plentiful. We treated skunks very kindly until they were out of the shanty, but the snakes did not fare so well. It was not an uncommon thing to get up in the morning and kill from one to three snakes, but they were of garter snake variety, but we would rather they had stayed out if it had suited them as well. At night it was hard to sleep for the howling of the wolves and the screeching of the owls, and I can't tell you how lonely it made us feel, but God was watching over us in our lonely shanty and kept us from harm, and during the day the Indians were our companions, so you see we were not entirely deprived of company.

LIFE IN A LOG HOME

Excerpt from: Life in a Log Home by Onieta Fisher

What was it like to live in a log cabin?

Picture a space no larger than your living room. Fill most of one end with a stone fireplace. Add two small windows and a door to the south. Lay rough boards across the beams to make a loft and put down split logs for the floor. Arrange a few pieces of furniture around the room—a table in the center, a chest, some straight chairs or stools, a trunk, a low rocking chair, and a pole bed in one corner. Shelves will hold the dishes. Now, we can let our family move into their furnished home.

The "family" probably will be a large one. First, we see "Ma" and "Pa" and their three children. (It's their house, according to the land grant locked in the tin chest under the bed.) There are, also, Ma's sister and her husband and their two (a third on the way). Pa's brother and his wife and their two are going to stay while the men are building cabins for the other families. For good measure, we should include a grandparent or a maiden aunt. We won't count the itinerant preacher because he will move on in a week or two.

EPHRAIM G. FARICHILD BUILDS A HOUSE

In sections of Iowa where timber was scarce, **sod homes** were used. Most often built in the northwest section of Iowa, sod homes were warm in winter and cool in summer. However, pioneer women complained about difficulties keeping the inside clean and free of the insects which would share the home with the pioneer family.

Whether living in a **sod home** or a **log home**, early settlers always lived in the hopes of something better. The "dwelling" house or **I-type home** made from milled boards was the goal of the settlers as they developed their farm.

The following paragraphs were taken from the letters of Ephraim G. Fairchild. He, along with his family, settled in eastern Iowa in the 1850s. Concerning the house he hoped to build, Ephraim writes to his family back in New Jersey:

July 25, 1857

Mother wants to know what kind of a house we live in. Well, I will tell you something about it. It is a log house, and quite rough at that, but it makes a shelter and does very well for a summer house. The room is not very large but it does quite well for us for we have but little to put in it, but we live in the hopes of having something more some of these days.

May 17, 1858

I am making very slow progress with my house. Everybody is so busy with their teams that it is impossible for me to get a team to do anything, but I think after planting I shall be able to get my lumber and nails and shingles and put up my house.

June 6, 1858

I have not got my house up yet nor all of my lumber together yet. It has been such bad going all the season that I could not get to go after it and I have gotten disappointed about trading nails for corn. So I shall have to adjourn building until I can find myself some other way and I don't know when that will be.

BUILDING A LOG CABIN

There is a difference between a log cabin and a log house. Cabins were cruder, built with round logs having most of the bark left on. The log house was a more "finished" structure, made of logs hewn "square" with the adze and broad axe. The adze blade was set on its handle somewhat as a hoe is. The woodsman first "chopped" notches in the top of the log, then turned it to the side. The broad axe was used to slice off the uniform cuts made by the adze. The finished log was more rectangular than square, its depth or width depending upon the original tree and tapering somewhat from the butt or wide end. This made one end slightly wider than the other; so in building the walls, the big ends of the logs were turned first one way and then the other to keep the walls level.

The logs were fitted together at the corners by means of notches and saddles. These joints were cut at a slant so that the rain drained off instead of soaking in to cause decay.

Nails were not used in log structures. Large wooden pegs or trunnels (tree nails) were used to secure timbers and the frames of the door and windows, hinges, and so on. The hinges might be made of wood, or leather; but by the time Iowa was being settled, iron hardware was available, often being made from strap iron in the pioneer's own "shop." The very earliest settlers sometimes burned their cabins to retrieve the hardware as they moved on farther into the wilderness. Hangers for clothing or harness were made by inserting a peg into a hole bored in the wall, or by nailing a forked stick in a handy place.

Windows and doors were cut after the walls were up and short "blocks" of logs were cut for the ends to rest on.

Open spaces in the walls were chinked with long wedges split from logs, like uneven slices of bread. Clay and sand or grass mixtures were plastered over them to keep most of the weather outside.

Early homes were set true to the compass to help the pioneers keep their directions straight, particularly on the prairie where there were few landmarks and where, on a cloudy day, it was easy to become confused and lost. The door was "to the south" to let in light and to mark the passage of time as the sun moved a shadow farther and farther along the floor.



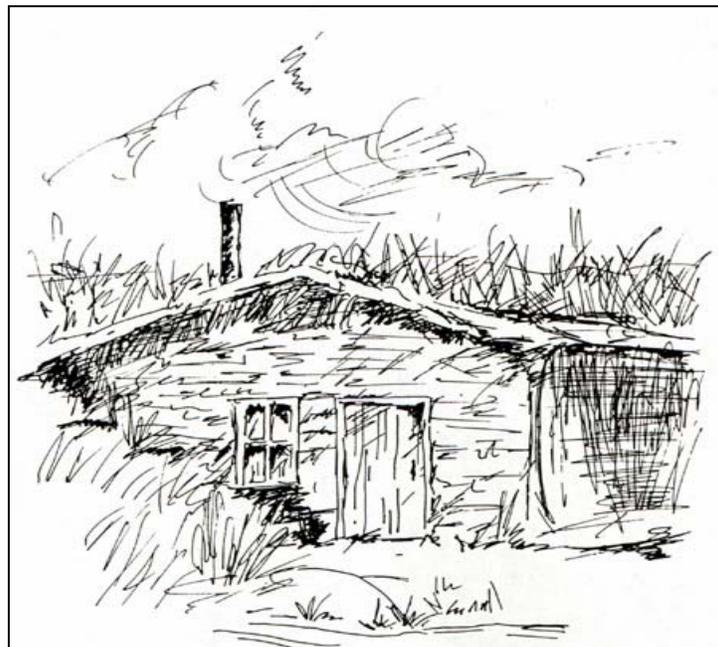
BUILDING A SOD HOUSE

In much of Iowa timber was scarce. The prairie sod made a good substitute for building homes. The first step in building a “soddie” was to mow an acre or so of grass. Then hitch the horses or oxen to a grasshopper plow. This type of plow turned over a strip of sod from 3 to 6 inches thick and a foot wide. Once it was turned over, the farmer used a sharp spade to chop the strip into the right lengths.

The first layer of sod was very important. It formed the foundation. The strips were placed grassy side down to make the outline of the house. When the first layer was level, the second layer was placed over it. Many farmers made a double row of sod strips so that the walls were from 2 feet to 30 inches thick. A fireplace of sod strips could be built on one wall. A few pieces of lumber could serve as the door and window frames. The resourceful builder found enough lumber in nearby towns or railroad supply centers.

The most difficult feature of the sod house was the roof. Pieces of lumber or timber were placed over the top of the walls. It needed to have the right slope. If the roof was too steep, the strips would slide off. If it was not steep enough, the water would not run off in a heavy rain. On the roof, the sod was placed grassy side up. In the spring, the sod roof turned green and in the summer prairie flowers bloomed. It was wise for the farmer to check root growth on the roof. Growing roots caused water to trickle down into the house.

The owner of the sod house found it warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Prairie winds could not topple a sod house. And its best feature was its cost. Fifteen dollars was about the top price for a sod house.



BUILDING THE I-TYPE FARM HOUSE

The design of the I-type farm home proved popular in the Midwest as settlement progressed from the east into Iowa. This type of house was quite economical. Lumbermen estimated its cost to be under \$400 for lumber, doors, windows, hardware and the bricks for chimneys. A stone or brick foundation, dependent upon location, could push the cost over \$400.

The I-type house made for a practical arrangement. It was possible to close off the front parlor. Every housewife appreciated a clean and tidy parlor when company arrived. The kitchen was large enough to include an eating area. A dining table could be placed on one side of the kitchen. A chimney on one kitchen wall enabled the housewife to enjoy a modern cook stove. The large pantry off the kitchen permitted the storage of flour, sugar, spices, and cooking utensils. Next to the pantry was a work area. Some farm families used this room to change into work clothes.

The upstairs bedrooms were heated through registers in the ceiling of the first floor rooms. The heat from stoves in the dining room and kitchen, plus the parlor fireplace, warmed the three bedrooms. The area at the head of the stairs made a sewing room for the housewife.

The large front porch provided a comfortable place to relax on hot summer evenings. Many farm families entertained their Sunday afternoon guests on the front porch. It also served as a sleeping area on hot summer nights.



Parish Farm house near Reinbeck, Iowa.