

*250 miles to the Post Office
100 miles to wood
20 miles to water
6 inches to hell.
God Bless our Home.
Gone to live with wife's folks.*

*sign on deserted cabin door
Blanco County, Texas 1886**

FOLK ARCHITECTURE IN THE SOUTHERN PLAINS

By CAROL J. BURR

The southeastern Colorado rancher must have been somewhat startled when a dusty Oldsmobile with Oklahoma tags rolled to a stop beside him and a bearded motorist leaned out to ask directions to a broken-down old house located on the edge of the Purgatorie River. As the rancher sent the stranger down the badly rutted pasture road, "out to the fourth windmill," he must have wondered what impelled the fellow to bump across the lonely 50,000-acre spread to look at a decaying wreck which the natives thereabouts considered unremarkable.

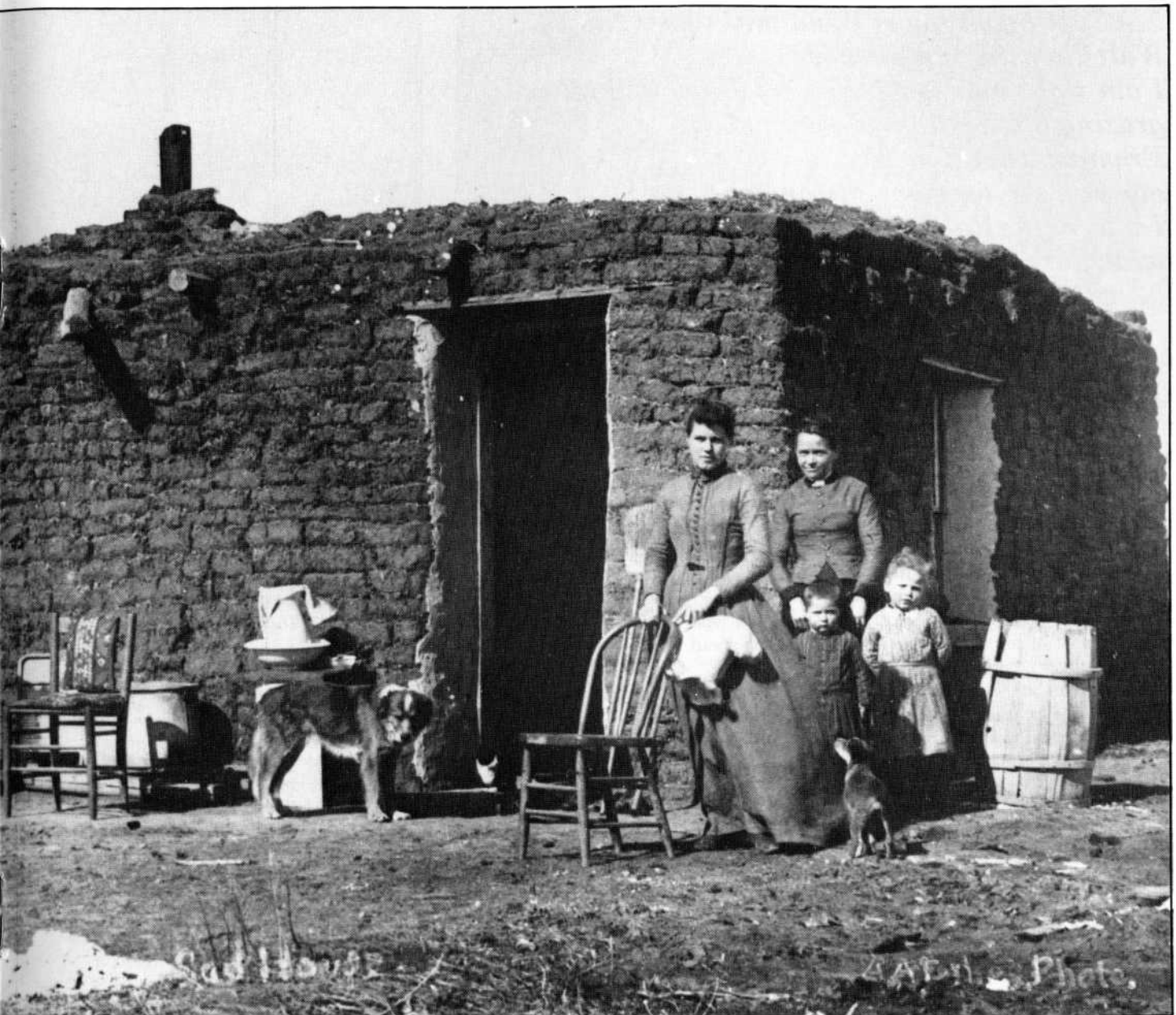
*From *The Farmers' Frontier 1865-1900*
by Gilbert C. Fite, © 1974 University
of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.



Sod House, Oklahoma Territory, 1890s.

The rancher had no way of knowing, of course, that he had just lent a hand to a modern-day prospector who was combing the Great American Desert with the same hopeful enthusiasm that had led early-day treasure-seekers to search for the mother lode. OU architecture professor Arn Henderson's object was not silver or gold, however, but rather the rapidly vanishing structural remnants of a bygone era.

Henderson began his quest in earnest two years ago, the academic outgrowth of a lifelong fascination with his rural Southwestern heritage, a sense of place which sprang from Ok-



OU Western History Collections

lahoma Panhandle wheat farmers on one side of the family and New Mexico ranchers on the other. His focus was “folk architecture,” an umbrella term he used to distinguish the vernacular, everyday buildings of the common man from the “high style” urban buildings designed or heavily influenced by architects.

“These were anonymous buildings,” Henderson says. “No architect, no professional designer, yet a lot of these buildings are really good architecture in a very orthodox sense—nice proportions, appealing geometry, form and space, light and shadows—all

those attributes that we use to characterize good buildings — in such things as barns, for instance.”

The Sooner architect limited his study area to the Southern Plains, including the western parts of Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas, and the eastern sections of New Mexico and Colorado, a region with common threads, common themes that “just don’t stop at the state borders.” His time frame encompassed the period from the Civil War and the passage of the 1862 Homestead Act, which began settlement of the Southwest, to the end of the Great Depression.

“There is a sense of continuity in this 80-year period from the Civil War to World War II,” Henderson explains. “After World War II, there was real change in the fabric of our society — in technology, in building forms.”

Backed by a research grant from the University of Oklahoma Associates and travel funding from the Oklahoma Foundation for the Humanities, Henderson took summers, weekends and a semester’s sabbatical leave to travel more than 22,000 miles, wearing out the Olds on all sorts of backroads, some barely qualifying for the name. He bought a

***Now sitting on top of Wind mill tower No. 56.
Watching the sun go down.
I am right now looking at a big buck antelope
grazing a few hundred yds. a way.
From where I now sit,
one can see for some distance.
I can see the Rabbit Ear Mountains in New Mexico,
which are 48 miles away.***

Will Tanner
Texas Panhandle, 1904*

tent and sometimes camped out to avoid motel costs, hoarding the grant dollars for gasoline and photographs.

A skilled photographer, Henderson acquired a Swedish-made Hasselblad, which he affectionately calls "the Cadillac of medium format cameras," and began perpetuating architectural history. As a professional architect, Henderson had been heavily involved in the physical preservation of historic buildings for some time, but in this project, most of his discoveries could only be preserved on film. Some were already little more than ruins and others in the process of destruction. Where no actual remnants remained, he searched through the photo archives of local, regional and state museums, libraries and historical societies, including the files of OU's own Western History Collections. He collected historical background, personal anecdotes and descriptions, both written and oral, anything to flesh out the story of the builders of the Southern Plains.

He found misconceptions about the types of buildings in the region. "Certainly sod houses and dugouts were used extensively in all phases of settlement," he says, "but there was more to it than that. There was interaction of the physical environment and the culture of the builder. Transportation was a determinant, such as nearby railroads to carry building materials.

"Economics was a major factor — the amount of money which the person had to build shelter," Henderson continues. "Unlike the earlier migration in the 19th century, which was essentially middle class, homesteaders in the 1920s were poor people, sharecroppers trying to construct shelter out of anything they could put their hands on."

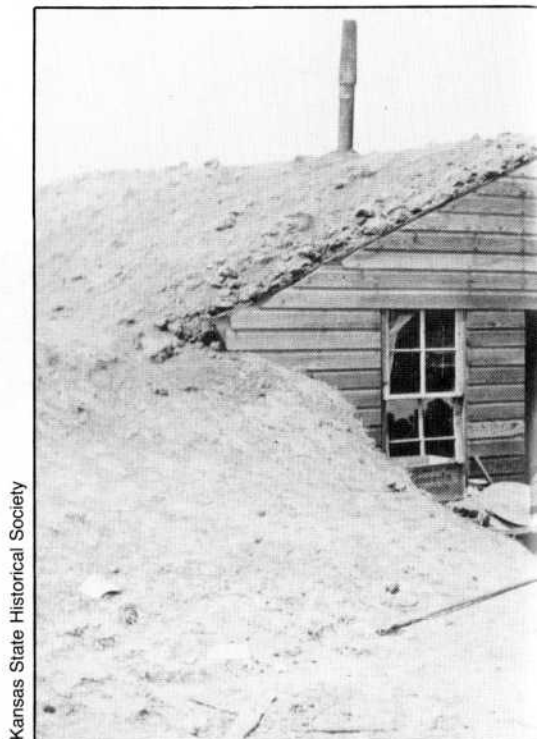
The ingenuity and resourcefulness of the unschooled builder was a constant source of amazement to the OU professor. "I'd rather be out talking to farmers and ranchers and finding good buildings than any other thing I can think of," Henderson insists. "I get a tremendous sense of excitement when I discover on my own some really great building — maybe a magnificent barn or a grain elevator. Of course the people who live in the neighborhood know about it, but nobody else knows it's there."

But the more folk architectural treasures he found and recorded, the more Henderson began to be anxious about those he had yet to find. "Out in western Kansas, where you have such good section lines, I'd find this beautiful barn down one section road, and then I'd think 'What might I find down just one more section road?'"

Eventually he came to the task of pulling together the mountain of material, the 2,000 photographs he had taken and hundreds more he had found in historical archives, into a traveling, interpretative photographic exhibit for the Oklahoma Foundation for the Humanities. That accomplished, the next step will be a book on the Folk Architecture of the Southern Plains.

The traveling exhibit, scheduled to open in Oklahoma City on June 1 for a two-month stay at the Oklahoma Historical Society, will be booked through that organization by museums and libraries throughout Oklahoma and later in other states.

The photographs in these pages of *Sooner Magazine* were selected from the 68 exhibition prints, which with complete narrative background, comprise Arn Henderson's latest contribution to architectural history.



Kansas State Historical Society

Mead Family Dugout, Ford County, Kansas.

MIGRATION TO THE SOUTHERN PLAINS

The descriptions of some early 19th century explorers caused the Southern Plains to be characterized as "The Great American Desert." Even in the decades of settlement, the area was scorned by some as a place not fit for human habitation. Some viewed it as a land of intense summer sun, chilling winter blizzards, and as a place plagued with rattlesnakes, dust storms, drought, hail storms, tornadoes, prairie fires and grasshoppers. Yet others took a more pragmatic view and accepted the bad along with the good. And many of those who occupied the land came to love it.

Sod House (example on Page 16/17)

Sod houses were made by cutting strips of grassy topsoil into blocks and stacking them up one on top of another to form a wall. They usually did not last long. They were subject to erosion by wind and rain; the condition of the sod was often poor; not everyone had good building skills. Children attending a sod school in Oklahoma Territory referred to their building as "Old Humpback," since one end wall had begun to sag no sooner than it had been built.

*From Will Tanner Diaries, Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, Canyon, Texas.



circa 1900.



Kansas State Historical Society

Interior View, Mead Dugout.

SHELTER FOR NEW IMMIGRANTS

The simplest, cheapest and quickest form of shelter to build was the dugout, most often dug into the side of a ravine or bank. Following initial excavation, side walls were ex-

tended, and often a forked post was set in the gable wall to carry the ridge beam, typically a cottonwood log. Secondary roof members would span from ridge beam to side walls and support a sod roof.



English Sheep Ranch, Sheridan County, Kansas, circa 1880.



Arn Henderson

Volga German Farm House, Russell County, Kansas, circa 1890.

Once the immediate need for shelter was satisfied, more durable, "second generation" structures tended to reflect the cultural origins of the builder. European immigrant groups in central and western Kansas, using the same abundant soft limestone, built settlements ranging from the Victorian English sheep ranches to the stark, massive, square-plan buildings of the thrifty, industrious Volga Germans.

Kansas State Historical Society



Picket and Sotol House, Crockett County, Texas, circa 1904; relocated to Ranching Heritage Center, Texas Technological University, Lubbock.

RANCHING STRUCTURES

Survival on remote 19th century ranches in the Southern Plains demanded ingenuity as well as perseverance. Early ranching structures were constructed of whatever materials were available.

One rancher in the dry climate of southwest Texas built a two-room

house out of stalks of sotol, a yucca-like plant, nailed horizontally on both sides of upright cedar posts. Dirt and small rocks were used as filler material for insulation. The gable roof of cedar poles was thatched with another yucca variety called sacahuiste. The second room of picket construction was added later.



Line Camp on the Matador Ranch in Texas.

GOLDEN ERA OF AGRICULTURE

Wheat Belt prosperity brought more substantial farm structures. Although a “better” house might be desired, a new barn was often more important, and many built while World War I raged in Europe are still in use today. Western Kansas farmer Robert Ingersoll used the off-season to build barns in a several-county area and was known not only for the quality of his work but also for his knowledge of a variety of styles. One of his best was the Brittain Barn (1916) in Rooks County, Kansas, which featured decorative scalloped gables.

With few “real” towns and poor roads to facilitate travel, the scattered rural populations organized and built their own schools and churches, often occupying the same structure. Names of the rural schools often reflected topographic features of the landscape: Big Rock, Plain View, Long View, High Point, Table Mesa and Big Flat. Some hoped to foster desirable attitudes toward education, such as the Wide-A-Wake School in the Cherokee Outlet, while at the other end of the spectrum was a school in Baca County, Colorado, named Ignorant Ridge.

THE HOMEMADE ARCHITECTURE

New public lands opened for homesteading by World War I veterans attracted primarily the very poor. Although using many of the techniques and materials of the earlier settlers, they also incorporated into the design manufactured items — in ways that were never intended.



Cotton Pickers, Texas Panhandle, circa 1934.



Brittain Barn, Rooks County, Kansas, 1916.

OF THE LAST HOMESTEADERS

When the drought came, many left, defeated by the dust storms that settled over the Southern Plains like a shroud. But others stayed and endured, like Tony Mihelsic, who ran cattle, tended grapes and brewed homemade hooch on the edge of the River Purgatorie.



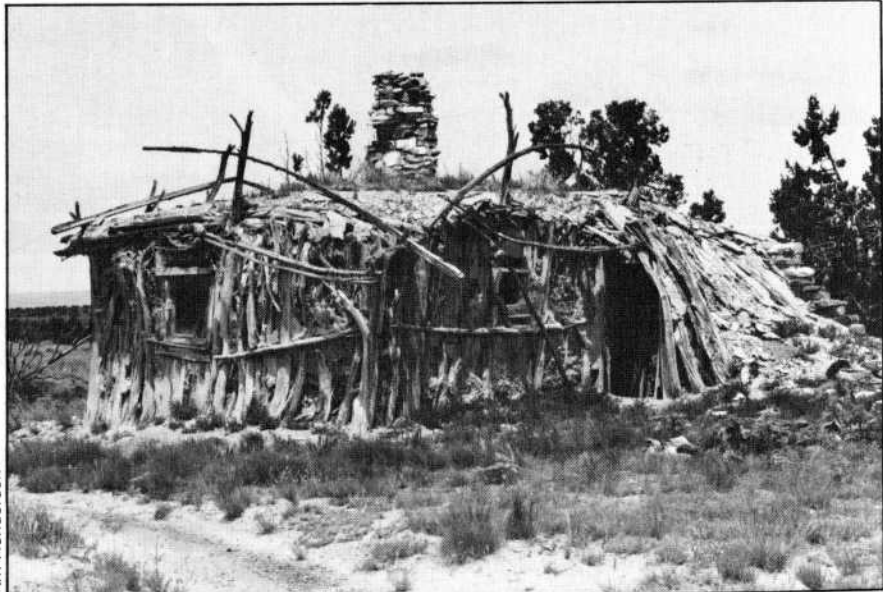
A few minutes ago I taken my saddle rope & killed a very large rattle snake. I am all alone in camp on Beaver Creek in Beaver Co. O.T.

*32 miles from any where.
The wind is blowing like cyclone & lightning constantly
Wish I was to home.*

Will Tanner
Oklahoma Panhandle, 1904



Second Central School, Kit Carson County, Colorado, 1913.



First Mihelsic House, southeastern Colorado.

Mihelsic built two houses, both still standing, unlike anything seen in the history of American architecture. The first was a hollowed-out mound of mud and sticks with roof and walls merging into something resembling a landslide. The second, more clearly a "house," had partition walls of woven grape vines covered with mud and a translu-

cent window of gallon jugs corbelled on their sides and set into a stone wall. The second house was still under construction when Mihelsic was killed in a car wreck in 1956. His Sunday pants, now covered with dust, still swing on a coathanger from an overhead beam in the home he was building for his future bride on the edge of Purgatorie. ☐