

Pioneer Period (1875-1882)

After arriving at their designated village site, while the surveying of the village lots was being completed and supplies and materials gathered for more secure accommodation, many of the Mennonites found shelter in tents they had purchased during their journey. Others were forced to simply endure the elements until the first crude dwellings were completed; a task which often took several weeks.

These first dwellings were usually small and hastily erected. Like other pioneer groups in Manitoba, the Mennonites used materials at hand including soil, sod, timber and grass to construct a temporary shelter in which to pass the first winter. In the MSTW district, the Mennonites constructed several types of initial structures: sod huts known as "Semlins", thatch huts or "Sarais" and occasionally sod-roofed log cabins. The sod "Semlin" was by far the most common structure built during the first few years (Figure 7).



Figure 7
A reconstructed "Semlin", located at the Mennonite Village Museum at Steinbach, Manitoba.

The same type of shelter had also been used during the initial settlement of the Russian colonies a century before. Although similar in construction to sod huts built by other settler groups on the prairies, the "Semlin" adhered to traditional Mennonite planning in that it was often divided into two sections - one for the settlers and the other for the livestock. The consequent concentration of body heat helped to keep out the cold and made tending the animals easier during the winter months. It was also easier to construct than two separate structures.

Occasionally a farmer chose to build the "Sarai", essentially a steeply pitched thatched roof which rested on the ground (Figure 8).



Figure 8
An early "Sarai". This type of shelter was an alternative building style to the "Semlin", but was not as warm and therefore not as common. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

The gable-shaped structure was about eight meters square, five and a half meters high at the peak, and was supported by long poles. Shiplap was sometimes used to line the family portion, and in a few cases this area was lined with logs. The "Sarai" was not as common as the "Semlin" in the MSTW district for it had been used by the first settlers in the East Reserve in 1874 and had proved to be much colder than the "Semlin". A number of settlers used this type of structure as a temporary stable for the livestock however.

Other Mennonite pioneers constructed simple, sod roofed log cabins often with attached stables (Figure 9).



Figure 9

Most of the early Mennonites in the West Reserve obtained logs for constructing their early shelters from the Pembina Hills. A few followed the example set by the southern Ontario settlers living there and built themselves small, sod-roofed log cabins. (Reinland, 1976: 53).

Like the other shelters, construction was simple and straightforward. Walls were built of thin round logs, connected by simple saddle notches and thickly plastered with clay. The roof usually consisted of a ridge pole supported by vertical timbers at either end of the structure. Thin rails were then placed on this and these in turn were covered with sod. Small glass windows and lumber from Emerson, enough for a door or perhaps a floor completed the structure. On occasion the walls were finished with a coating of whitewash. This protected the plaster and improved the appearance of the structure.

A few settlers constructed separate structures for the livestock, but as a contemporary account by Klass Wall who arrived by 1876 indicates, these first barns were often not as well constructed as the dwellings:

We also made somewhat of an excavation for our cattle barn. We erected the walls with split logs and put earth around them. It is sixteen feet long and sixteen feet wide. But its roof is only of hay, without spars and laths because of inadequate time, for sometimes it was already getting quite cold. (Reinland, 1976: 86)

None of these initial structures exist today. The Mennonite pioneers hoped that the first shelters they built would be temporary and so they were not intended to last. The materials themselves ensured that within a few years the structure would begin to deteriorate.