

# Soddies: Home, Home In the Range

So give me a home where the buffalo roam

Just get me the heck out of this sod house.

You know, I used to say there weren't any great songs about sod houses because no one went all rhapsodic about living in thick dirt. A sod house kept out heat and cold in remarkably efficient ways and likely never blew away. Let it be said—or sung—that sure as anything a soddie was a shelter in the time of storm. But far as I knew, nobody ever picked out a song about a sod house that found its way into the American soul. No siree.

Not long ago I found one. I'm not lying--a song about a sod house. Let's be plain-talking here: it's not got the lyricism of "Home on the Range" or "Tumblin' Tumbleweeds," but it's real, an actual song about soddies:

When we left our home back yonder we had all that mortal needs: horses,  
cows and tools abundant, household goods and garden seeds,  
covered wagon full to bursting, Bob and Betty full of glee;  
going west to take a homestead, happy kiddies, Kate and me.

It's coming. It's coming. Don't get so anxious.

Soon we landed in Nebraska where they had much land to spare,  
But most ever since we've been here, we've been mad enough to swear;  
First, we built for us a 'sod house' and we tried to raise some trees;  
But the land was full of coyotes and our sod house full of fleas.

You're saying—I can hear you--that there's nothing the least bit celebratory in that muddy ode. Whatever sod-buster penned it wasn't taken with his country home. No wide copper bowl of sky above and no endless swirl of cone flowers just outside. That dumb song no tribute, you're saying.

Look. It's not easy to wax nostalgic about garter snakes winding out of the roots in the ceiling, about mud floors and thick darkness mid-day. 'Twas a blessing to have a window, even if the only little hole in the soddie's two-foot walls was covered in muslin, to keep out. . .to keep out everything, but allow at least a sliver of light into otherwise abysmal darkness.

The very first earth dwellings in the far northwest corner of Iowa weren't even soddies, but dugouts. Didn't cost a dime but labor, of course; and a dugout at least got you and the kiddos out of the wind. You lived like a worm, but at least you didn't freeze come January. Tornados were little more than pillow fights. Dugouts and soddies were an insulator's dream, but they never ever came clean. After all, they were made of dirt.

When the sod balls settled--which they always did--you had to fill the gaps with more dirt. Constantly.

But you could put 'em up in just a few days, especially where the earth took kindly to losing its skin. Cost? Maybe five bucks and whatever it might cost you for a window. Efficient? --shoot yes. Ecological? --to a fault.

Environmentally attuned? —perfect pitch. Soddies were “prairie school” architecture: they fit faultlessly into grassland landscapes. Frank Lloyd Wright would have loved 'em.

East of here, not many homesteading lowans started out in soddies because sufficient trees made log cabins much-preferred real estate. But out here trees went at a premium. If you wanted to homestead northwest Iowa, last

place in the state to be homesteaded and the best doggone farmland anywhere, your first move was to put your nose to the sod.

But nobody stayed long. If you wanted to prove up your claim, you had to make your chunk of land look prosperous, including the domicile. Average stay in a soddie? --five years. When abandoned, I'm sure no one shed a tear.

Most were just one room for the whole family. Not far from here, one immigrant family took in another, so the whole bunch slept in eight-hour shifts.

That little song I read is the only psalm to the soddie I've ever seen. Someone actually sat down and wrote her memory of a way of life that once upon a time was all around, but never greatly beloved.

The sod house. For some here, at least it got us by. Thanks be to God, it got us by.