

Dugout Home

In the late nineteenth century, the U.S. government began opening parcels of land in the Oklahoma Territory for homesteading and settlers enthusiastically staked claims and built homes. Dugout construction varied according to characteristics of the landscape, availability of supplementary materials, size and needs of the family, urgency of the desire for shelter, and the skill and creativity of the builder. Oklahoma dugouts were constructed either by digging straight down into the ground or by digging horizontally into the face of a hill. Either type might be completely underground, or it might extend several feet above the ground, the upper portion being built of sod, logs, rock, or lumber. Floods, wild animals, snakes, and insects were a constant menace to Oklahoma dugout dwellers. However, the settlers found that dugouts were lifesaving structures during bitter territorial winters, prairie fires, and cyclones.





SOD HOUSE

As elsewhere on the Great Plains, timber was scarce in central and western Oklahoma Territory. Early settlers built their first shelters from what was available, thick prairie sod. A typical sod house (soddy) was about fourteen feet by sixteen feet in size with a seven-and-one-half-foot high wall, a low-pitched roof, a central side door, and one or two windows. Interior walls were often finished with plaster or covered with newspapers, and canvas was often suspended from the ceiling to make the space lighter and to improve cleanliness. Furnishings were sparse and simple, but prized lace curtains or an heirloom piece of furniture were not uncommon in these humble dwellings.

To build a soddy the homesteader first chose a construction site, squared the interior dimensions of the house, and dampened and packed the floor area. Then the builder selected an acre or so of unbroken ground and used a breaking plow to cut the sod into long strips about twelve to eighteen inches wide and three to four inches thick. These were then cut with a sharp spade into two- to three-foot-long blocks that were hauled to the house site on a wagon or sled. Each morning just enough sod was broken and cut into blocks for use that day because the sod blocks were easier to handle when the moisture content was high.

As dwellings, dugouts were affordable and practical. They provided refuge from tornadoes, a warm earth in the winter, and a cool retreat in the summer. Problems with ventilation, lighting, insects, flooding or seepage, and the stigma of living underground, like prairie dogs, contributed to the perception of the dugout as an expedient but temporary solution to a housing problem. Indeed, the social pressure to live in a frame house, together with improved access to milled lumber, spelled the demise of the dugout as a residential form. Few dugouts were built in Oklahoma after 1900, and many of those still in existence were used as cellars or storm shelters.



