EASTERN EUROPEAN BUILDING TRADITIONS IN MANITOBA

First Ukrainian Buildings in Manitoba (1897-1915)

The initial shelters built by the settlers who arrived early in the year were of a temporary nature and were typically occupied for only a month while a more substantial structure was built. Such shelters, known as budahs, were usually crude one-room huts, simple lean-tos or teepees built of small trees and branches (Figure 7).

If the settlers arrived too late in the season to construct a proper house, a more substantial pit shelter would be built in which to pass the winter. In this case, a small pit was often dug into the ground to increase the size of the interior. Local historical literature indicates that such temporary shelters were not uncommon in the Eastern Interlake: Samen and Stefan Demedash, and their families, arrived late in the fall. Since it was too late to build a house they selected a spot on a ridge where they excavated their cellars. Then they made their roofs of dry poplar poles for form teepees and covered them with dry hay and sod. Evidently, they spent a comfortable winter in these huts, while the men walked to their farms every day to erect the skeletons to the farm buildings which they completed the next summer. (Ewanchuk, 1977, p. 66)

Figure 7
A typical temporary shelter constructed by Ukrainian settlers. This example was photographed in northern Alberta in 1912. (Public Archives Canada)

Figure 8
An early Ukrainian home near Gimli, ca. 1905. Unpeeled poplar logs, saddle-notch corner joints, the crudely thatched roof with gable ends of roughly cut planks, and the unfinished plaster coating on the walls are characteristics typical of many early Ukrainian homes. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

Given the temporary nature of these initial structures, it is not surprising that none have survived in the planning district. The Ukrainian pioneer, after wintering in temporary shelters, or upon arriving early in the spring, set out to construct a relatively permanent dwelling. This structure followed Ukrainian vernacular traditions. However, there was little time or material available to carefully construct the large houses with close attention to traditional elements. Initial houses were small in size and hastily constructed (Figure 8).
The walls of these early homes were usually built of thin, unpeeled poplar logs. The corners were secured with crude dovetail joints or, because of the simplicity of the cut, the more popular grooved or saddle-notch. The roofs were either simply stacked with grass or were roughly thatched. The following detailed description of the construction process of a typical initial home was recounted by Peter Humeniuk:

> After finding a high spot for the buildings, the homesteader cleared it for the house. Then he dug a well to have water. Next he dug a cellar for the house, about 8' by 6' deep. He found about a dozen stones suitable for foundation, set them into place and levelled them. Then he cut enough trees nearby to build the house having no draft animals, he carried or dragged them by hand. Usually, he peeled the bark off with a drawknife to prevent them from rotting. The foundation sills, floor, and ceiling joists had to be squared by an axe. Where necessary, 1" oak dowels were used instead of nails to hold the logs together.

Ceilings were made from round or split trees and plastered. In many cases, the floor was hard-packed ground and plastered over. The rafters were fastened with oak pegs and well-braced. Door and window frames were made from split logs. Thin willow sticks were nailed diagonally across the outside and inside walls to hold the plaster better. While the men were getting the log grass from the meadow for thatching the roof, the women were preparing clay for plastering. They dug a small pit and with their bare feet they kneaded the mixture into plaster. This they applied with their bare hands to the outside and inside walls and the ceiling. (Figure 9)

Figure 9
Ukrainian settlers applying mud plaster to an early structure of post and fill construction. Usually applied to both the inner and outer walls, the coating sealed and insulated the buildings and also provided for a smooth, finished appearance. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

The chimney and oven were made of wooden frame and also plastered from inside and outside. Two pairs of door hinges, 2 latches, 2, 3, or 4 small windows and about 5 pounds of assorted nails were the few essential materials the immigrants could afford to purchase for their house. (Humeniuk, n.d., p. 51)

Depending upon the care with which they were constructed, and the economic progress of the settler, most of the early homes were replaced in eight or ten years. The original structure was then utilized as a summer kitchen or was used for poultry. In cases where the first home was retained beyond the initial settlement period, a number of improvements were usually made. These could include the replacement of the thatch roof with one of wood shingles, the replacement of the traditional homemade clay oven with a cast-iron stove or the installation of a lumber floor and manufactured windows and doors.

In the planning district, only a few of these early homes still exist, and most are in very poor physical condition. In addition, most have had major alterations made to them to facilitate alternate uses over the years. The addition of extra doors or windows made the buildings useful as poultry coops while machinery storage sheds could be created with the complete removal of portions of the walls and ceiling. One fairly good example is located at NE 1-18-3E, at the extreme southern edge of the planning district (Figure 10).

Figure 10
The former Lawrence Babiak residence, NE 1-18-3E, 1900. This structure, last occupied in 1948, is possibly the oldest remaining Ukrainian house in the planning district. Although the materials are sound, part of the roof has collapsed as a result of the removal of portions of the east and south walls for use as firewood.

A single storey Galician house, the structure is oriented east-west and has a doorway on the south side. The larger of the two rooms is on the east and the smaller is on the west. The doorway and the chimney are located in the small room, the mala khata.

The walls of this house are constructed of thin logs, peeled but left in the round. The dovetailed notches in the corners are somewhat crudely cut, resulting in loose fitting walls with relatively large spaces between many of the logs. These spaces were filled with wood scraps before the traditional mud plaster was applied. The door and window frames are made of shaped logs, rather than the cut lumber frames commonly found in later homes. A number of interesting connections were used in the construction of this house (Figure 11).

As was sometimes the case with Ukrainian structures built of logs left in the round, diagonal lathing was not nailed to the walls to provide purchase for the mud plaster. The natural undulations of the round logs were sufficient to hold the plaster. The plaster in the Babiak house was given a blue colour finish on the interior and the usual brilliant white lime finish on the exterior.

One of the more interesting aspects of this house is the unusual gable roof shape, which is hipped at one end. Although the original thatch roof has been replaced with wooden shingles, the rafters and roof shape are apparently original. Only one other roof of this type was encountered in the planning district, on a small shed several kilometres north of the Babiak house. Another log structure, possessing several Bukovynian characteristics, is located in the extreme southwest corner of the R.M. of Bifrost (Figure 12).

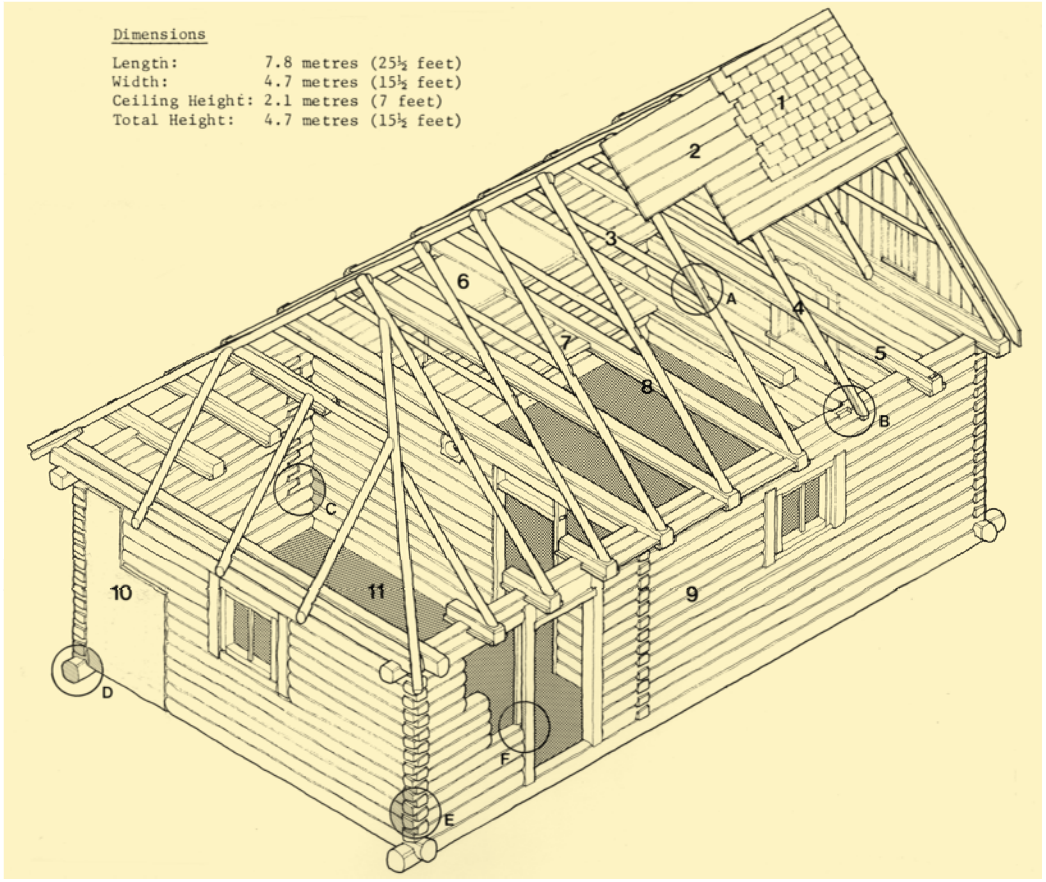

Figure 11
Babiak house: construction details.

Building Materials

1) Roofing: split wooden shingles
2) Roof sheathing: 25 mm (1") unplaned lumber; varying widths
3) Collar beams: 75-100 mm (3-4") diameter peeled rails
4) Rafters: 100-125 mm (4-5") diameter peeled rails
5) Joists: 125x150 mm (5x6") hewn beams
6) Insulation: 100 mm (4") of earth and clay
7) Attic flooring: 50x100-150 mm (2x4-6") planks; laid between joists
8) Ledger strips: 50 mm (2") square strips; nailed to joists
9) Walls: 125-200 mm (5-8") diameter peeled logs
10) Mud plaster: applied to interior and exterior walls
11) Floor; earth over 50 mm (2") planking

Connections

A) Collar beam lap-joint at rafter; nailed
B) Joist seat notched into top plate; rafters form mortise and tenon peg-joints at joist ends
C) Side wall lap-joint; nailed
D) Sill beam and top plate corners: nailed half-lock
E) Corner and dividing wall: crude dovetail
F) Framing of openings use tongue and groove joints with mortise and tenon at sill and plate

Figure 12
The former A. Leszcyzynski residence, SE 5-22-1E, ca. 1910. This structure had undoubtedly been abandoned for many years. All the windows, the door, chimney, and the lumber from one of the gable ends has been removed, but it is still in good physical condition.

The three-room plan with centrally located doorway and chimney are characteristically Bukvynian as is the prominent eave projection on all sides of the structure. Although constructed of thin unsquared logs with saddle-notched corners (both early features) the building exhibits a great deal of care in its construction and was certainly not hastily built. The straight, uniformly thick logs were carefully selected and the corner notches were expertly cut allowing few spaces between the logs.