Earthen Homes of the Great Plains

A Review Essay by Robert Kurtz


Earth structures have been a part of the Great Plains for thousands of years. From Native American earthlodges to the German-Russian long houses, these structures are synonymous to the Plains. It would seem that anyone attempting to tell the story of early settlers within this vast land would find themselves amiss if they left out the shelters these settlers constructed to protect themselves from the harsh, sudden changing elements it can deliver. So why is it that these homes are overlooked by many writers of the Plains? Is it because the subject is too narrow, or the topic itself is simply too, well, to put it frankly, boring? Succinctly, “taken for granted,” or “written off as temporary” would be some good phrases to describe this lack of attention. Regardless of how these structures are viewed, they are as much a part of the history
of the Great Plains as the settlers themselves, as a matter of fact; one couldn’t exist without the other.

Virginia Bergman Peters begins this review with her feminist approach to life among the Native cultures within the upper Missouri River valley. Her book titled *Women of the Earth Lodges: Tribal Life on the Plains* focuses on a very important and neglected aspect in history, women. To be more specific, women belonging to what is known today as the Three Affiliated Tribes, also known as the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara. Peters references primary sources such as the writings of George Catlin, Henry Boller, Karl Bodmer, and Gilbert Wilson in an attempt to reveal the roles women played within the villages.

Peters makes a case as to how women influenced the daily activity found both inside and outside of the village, placing greater influence on matriarchal traditions within individual families. Her emphasis on women’s societies and ceremonies and their corroboration with “nineteenth-century eye witness accounts and twentieth-century reminiscences of women who still remembered the old ways” is a breath of fresh air when it comes to the belated history of an underrepresented group.

With respect to earth homes, Peters’ focus relates to early earthlodges on the Plains, not the style of homes early settlers built utilizing traditions brought over from the old country. However, it is worthwhile to understand some of the traditions that surround these earthlodges. Peters describes many of these traditions very well. Traditions such as Native American women built, and owned their earthlodges. When a woman married, the man moved into her lodge and if they divorced, he had to leave. Women also constructed both the winter and the summer earthlodges, with the exception of the four center posts which were very large
and considered spiritual so these were installed by the men, something Peters tends to brush off. Even with the lack of information concerning the material and construction methods of the earthlodges, *Women of the Earthlodges* is a well researched book, filling in a much needed gap in our history.

Virginia Bergman Peters did to Native Americans what most historians tend to do concerning early white settlers of the Plains, tell the story around the structure. Everett Dick is no exception to the rule, although it would not be too hard to argue that he wrote one, if not the, best social history of the area in his book titled, *The Sod House Frontier*. His narrative style of writing is miles apart from Peters’ at times stagnant style, making this book wonderful addition to any history scholar or buff. Dick describes the struggle of the common man making his way to the Plains and the many road bumps, literal and metaphorical; he will run into.

Everett Dick covers such a variety of topics it is hard to combine them into one review. He covers areas of early financing and the use of banks, different ways to travel, homesteading, and vigilantes to watch for along the way and after you have settled. He covers squatters and trappers, as well as confrontations between whites and Indians, the church on the Plains, women and children, and prairie towns. These descriptions are not dry historical accounts by any means, the use of wit, humor and dozens of personal accounts, newspaper and magazine articles, interviews, and secondary sources make this book one for all readers.

What Everett Dick does is dedicate an entire chapter to the sod house. Although he tells most of the story about the sod house through the living conditions of those who owned them, he also discusses some of the material aspects of the home and provides a few photographs as well. Dick discusses the cost of one of these homes as well as some of the construction
methods used. He does this through written personal accounts of the homeowners. One house that Dick lists in this chapter is the cost of fourteen foot square dugout, which reached whopping “$2.78 \frac{1}{2}” to build; expensive at the time (112). He goes on further to describe some of the pros and cons of living in a sod house as well as the “average life of a sod house [being] six or seven years” (115).

Of his 517 page book Dick dedicates a chapter to sod homes, a total of nine pages, two of which are photos. Although he dabs in the material culture of these houses through his descriptions of finding the proper timber to hauling the mud or cut sod to the sight, Dick does what most historians do by focusing more on the social culture that surrounds these buildings. After all, his intentions were to put together a social history of the settlers among the Great Plains and he did just that . . . exceptionally well. Agency, complexity, and memory fill this historical account of early settlers; by far one of the best works of the era.

For the Centennial celebration of the creation of North Dakota as a state, a group of scholars collaborated on one of the most detailed books of ethnic history in the Northern Plains titled *Plains Folk: North Dakota’s Ethnic History*. Similar to *The Sod House Frontier* in the sense of the social histories and narrowed geographical focus, *Plains Folk* narrows it even further by discussing the different ethnicities that immigrated into North Dakota. The contributors include scholars in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science, and history; all of which have spent years in academia within the state of North Dakota and have done extensive research of specific ethnic groups within the state as well.

What is different about the overall style of writing in *Plains Folk* is that it seems to take on a more descriptive or quantitative approach to ethnic history of this region. Many maps, graphs,
and charts are used to describe population growth among specific areas of North Dakota as well as trends and migration patterns detailing years of mass immigration and how they coincide with events happening both in the state and in the country of origin. The book also does a good job of showing many of the cultural traits associated with each ethnic group covering topics like music, dress, farming and mining techniques, as well as what they ate and how some of it was prepared. *Plains Folk* even puts forth some effort to show some of building styles of individual groups.

Just as Everett Dick does, much of the descriptions of homes and structures revolve around the cultures that lived in them rather than the material. Again, this is expected, due to the nature of the book. However, there are brief excerpts within the book describing some of the building materials used as well as some wonderful photos of clay brick, long houses in addition to several other styles of homes photographed in their country of origin and in North Dakota. Overall, *Plains Folk* is a wonderful addition to anyone’s collection of books covering North Dakota’s history. What this book does really well, from the point of view of someone studying the structures that these ethnic groups built, is it “thickens” the history around earth homes. In essence, it is making the history of the earth home richer.

Another book that focuses on the not all the ethnicities of North Dakota, just one, is Richard Sallet’s book titled, *German-Russian Settlements in the United States*. Sallet takes a look at the German-Russians and their migration throughout the United States, a daunting task to begin with considering all of the locations Sallet had to cover. With this in mind, it has to be said that he seemed to have done a pretty good job of it, but it does leave the reader to wonder what, if anything, got missed in the research. What is unique about this book is that Sallet dedicates
names used in specific districts showing the German names as well as the Russian names. This book is a good resource for those who are working in genealogy or simply trying to confirm or deny an ancestral name.

Originally printed in German, Russian-German Settlements in the United States is more of an outsider’s view of a specific ethnic group and their migration to and within the continental United States. Although Richard Sallet extensively travelled and even attended and taught school in America, the fact that the book was printed in German shows where the author’s heart truly is. Not that this is a bad thing, it simply reveals the audience that it was written for. This is something that the reader may want to take into consideration when interpreting Sallet’s work.

The most important thing about this book has nothing to do with Richard Sallet at all; it has to do with a wonderful epilogue written by William C. Sherman titled, Prairie Architecture of the Russian-German Settlers. Of all the people who know anything about architecture on the upper Great Plains, they also know Mr. Sherman. There is quote by Sherman in the epilogue that sums up the reasons historians and scholars alike focus on the people around the earth home and not the home itself; it is due to its monumental status . . . “A house is a testimony to the family that builds it, with its various years of struggle and success. But it is also a monument to a people with their collective experiences, their migrations, their values, and their achievements” (185). This quote alone justifies those thousands of photos where the earth home idly sits in the background while the family stands tall and proud.

Although William C. Sherman understands where these homes stand, he does not repeat the same offense as the books reviewed prior to this. Sherman briefly discusses the layout of the
homes and the four basic construction methods; ie, puddled, adobe brick, stone, and rammed earth (186). Sherman goes on to discuss different locations throughout the Plains where German-Russians have settled and how the dirt and geography varied and influenced certain types of structures. He even draws out some typical floor plans used by early settlers and understands that these building styles were dictated by the land, suggesting Walter Webb’s theory of environmental determination. Sherman did not stop there; he also included several photos of earth homes revealing the different styles among German-Russians found in North Dakota.

Roger Welsch does to sod homes what William C. Sherman did for German-Russian architecture, only Welsch took it even further. Roger Welsch is a folklorist who came across hundreds of photographs taken by Solomon D. Butcher when he asked to see a picture of a sod house at the Nebraska State Historical Society. After taking an entire week to scan through the photos, Welsch decided to devote an entire book to the “soddy,” using much of Butcher’s research.

Welsch starts off with a brief introduction of the early sod homes that were built by the first inhabitants of the Great Plains. He suggests the similarities and stereotypes of Native American dwellings and also shows how some of them were built. In chapter two Welsch jumps right into the guts of the sod home, describing what some of the earlier sod homes built by white settlers may have looked like and then get into the construction of the home itself. He goes as far as drawing his own “how-to” pictures concerning the construction of windows, doors, roofs, and the proper way to build the walls. He even takes it further in discussing the best types of
grasses to use (buffalo grass) and even the best locations to build a sod home with reference to a workable field, water, etc.

Of course Welsch has a variety of photographs that he uses as examples to some of his procedures he explains, as well as a variety of finished houses and some extravagant sod homes. He even goes as far as to show what happens when something is too hastily installed by showing a family standing in front of a collapsed roof on their soddy. He discusses the use and placement of windows and the better options for the best direct sunlight in the winter and the least in the summer to keep the temperature cool in the summer heat and warm in the winter.

In chapters three and four we find ourselves on familiar ground discussing the life of those who lived in the sod homes. Needless to say, life in a rudimentarily constructed sod home was less than elegant, but regardless of the negative attitudes of those who lived in them, these homes still served their purpose and many of these pioneers would not be around to complain without them. Welsch ends his books with a selection of witty songs and tales written about the sod shanty and the living conditions one would confront if they decided to build one.

Even though the literature on earth homes is slim when it comes to the material culture, the text that is out there places these buildings at a much higher level than originally perceived. These buildings were a testament to the tenacity of those who had no doubt they were going to do well in this part of America. When reading these books one has to take into account the extreme bias, which is expected and accepted. The Great Plains have much to offer anyone living or moving to the area. To say it is unique, is true, but do not let these authors or any locals try to tell you it is one of a kind. These earth homes were not created here, they evolved here.