

Initial Structures (1875-1885)

When the first group of Icelandic settlers landed on the shores of Lake Winnipeg in 1875 they were unaware of the severity of western Canadian winters were thus ill-prepared and provisioned. The subterranean group structures familiar to them could not be quickly constructed in the frozen ground of Manitoba and while plentiful timber could have provided them with immediate shelters, it was, by the nineteenth century, an unfamiliar building material to them. They were fortunate that a government survey team, sent with them to commence surveying the land within the reserve, showed them how to put together a rudimentary log cabin.

In all, 30 log cabins (the number limited by the number of stoves purchased in Winnipeg) were erected in a joint effort by the settlers. According to Simon Simonson, one of the first settlers, these structures were "12' x 12' in size, man high, of rails which with difficulty we managed to drag to the site." (Simonson, 1946, p. 46). The low walls were surmounted by rafters topped with grass from a nearby low spot. At the corners the walls were connected with a simple grooved or saddle-notched joint (Figure 4).

The doors in some were so low that the occupants had to crawl on their hands and knees to enter. A few had small fixed windows, while others had none. In some cases the wood from the flat boats served as floors for their shelters, but in most cases, the structures were built on flat stones or simply on the hard ground. Each structure not only housed two or three families throughout the first severe winter but also provided shelter for whatever livestock they had brought (Figure 5). None of these crude dwellings have survived to the present.

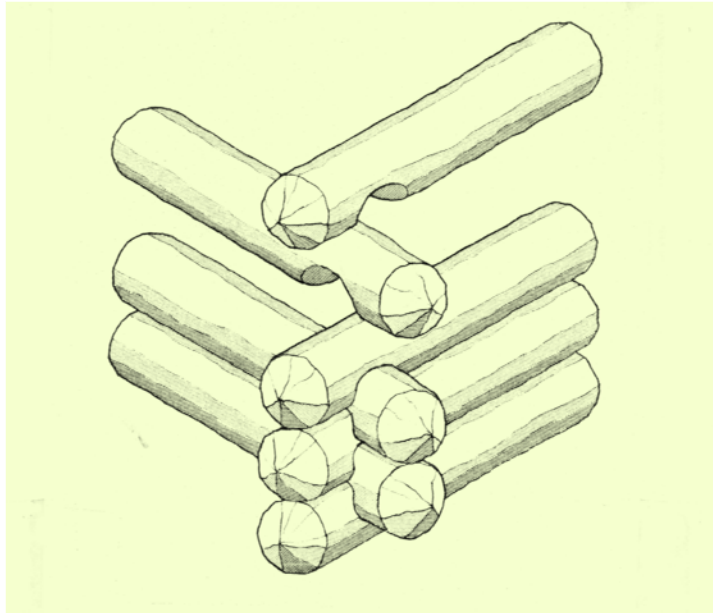


Figure 4

In saddle-notch construction round logs were lapped and, at the corners, curved notches were cut about 300 mm (1') back from the end of the log. The location of the saddle-notch on the bottom of the log was more desirable as it allowed water to drain downwards, reducing the possibility of rain gathering in a top-notch and rotting the joint.



Figure 5

Gimli, 1925. Pioneers of 1875 and 1876 stand before a reconstruction of one of the initial homes on the fiftieth anniversary celebration of New Iceland. Details such as the saddle-notch corners, rails and grass roof, and the crude but Effective door hinge match early descriptions. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

The houses constructed by the large Icelandic group that arrived in 1876 were not only slightly better than those built at the Gimli settlement the previous year but also began displaying some traditional Icelandic forms (Figure 6).

John Ramsay, a well known local native, taught many of the newcomers how to improve the cabins. With four or five men at work, a more substantial cabin using hewn logs with dovetailed corners and having windows could be finished in two days. The roofs of some of these cabins were constructed of lumber purchased in Selkirk. The interior arrangements of these one-roomed dwellings were simple: a stove was placed in the middle and beds along the side walls. Some houses had sleeping quarters in a loft above the main floor.

With the first five years of settlement being very difficult, simple log structures of this type remained the principal form of housing in the colony until the early 1880s. One of these early homes was only recently demolished (Figure 7).

Another structure fitting the descriptions of these early houses is still located near the village of Hnausa (Figure 8). Long time residents of the area recall that the building was used for a time as a house and later as a blacksmith shop.



Figure 6
These gable-roofed log houses were joined, like their Icelandic predecessors with a narrow gabled entrance.



Figure 7
Constructed in 1876 by Fridjon Frederickson, this log cabin held the honour of being the oldest home in Gimli when this photograph appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press in 1950 .(Manitoba Legislative Library)



Figure 8
The walls of this pioneer log house were chinked with a sand and lime mortar and then white-washed.