

Traditional Period (1880 - 1900)

Early Structures (1880-1885)

The initial shelters constructed by the Mennonites were usually replaced within a few years by more secure structures. Although these structures usually followed the traditional house/barn design of the Russian colonies, there is still neither the time nor the materials available for the construction of large permanent buildings with carefully worked details. Many of these first house/barn units and especially the barn sections were small and hastily constructed (Figure 10).



Figure 10

Early Mennonite homes in the West Reserve, as depicted by a newspaper artist, ca. 1878. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

The house and barn were joined end to end, in the traditional manner, to form a long, single structure. The building was, as a rule, set perpendicular to the village street. Both house and barn always faced either east or south regardless of the side of the street on which they were located.

The floor plan of these early homes usually consisted of four rooms: the "Groote Shtov" (large room), the "Tjleene Shtov" (small room), the "Fae T'Hues" and "Alt T'Hues" (front and back hall) (Figure 11).

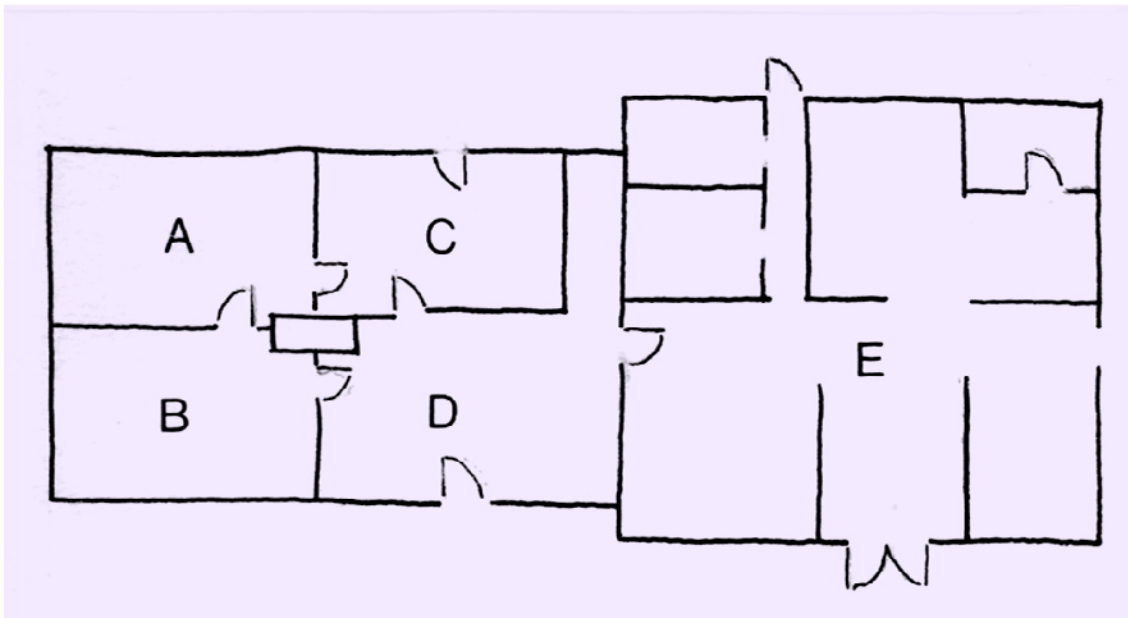


Figure 11
Floor plan an early Mennonite house/barn: A – Tjleene Shtov; B – Groote Shtov; C – Alt T'Hues; D – Fae T'Hues; and E - Shtall.

The "Groote Shtov" doubled as the living room and bedroom for the parents and infants. The "Tjleene Shtov" and "Alt T'Hues" were used as children's bedrooms and the kitchen was usually located in the "Fae T'Hues". The number of rooms often varied in these early houses, with one or two walls being added or removed depending upon family size and resources.

The house was invariably constructed of logs and covered with a thatched roof as milled lumber was still unavailable or unaffordable. Because the main building material in the Russian colonies, for many years, had been brick, the Mennonites in Manitoba were unfamiliar with log construction techniques and had to rely on examples and advice provided by neighbouring English settlers. As a result, the majority of the early house/barn units in the MSTW district were built using the dovetail or a variation of the saddle notch method, both popular with the Anglo/Ontarian settlers in the region. For the same reason, the Mennonites in the East Reserve used the "pièce-sur-pièce" or post-and-fill method of log construction commonly found in the neighbouring French and Métis settlements along the Red River.

Fortunately, several early log structures still survive in the MSTW district, although they are rapidly deteriorating. As one would suspect from descriptions of pioneer Mennonite life, these log buildings seem to have been relatively crude and hastily built. One example, built around 1876 in the village of Hochfeld and still occupied, has logs that were sawn smooth on the inside but left round on the exterior side (Figure 12). In this example saddle notches were used at the corners. A rare example of post and fill construction still exists in the village of Osterwick (Figure 13).



Figure 12

Peter Wiebe residence,
Hochfeld, ca. 1876.



Figure 13

Former Jake Theissen
residence, Osterwick, ca. 1878.

This technique had the advantage of incorporating short lengths of timber which made handling and actual construction much easier than the other methods. In this case the timbers used for the uprights were squared and attached to sill and top plates with a simple mortise and tenon notch. The horizontal filler logs were left in the round and simply wedged between the uprights. Post-and-fill construction usually entailed more careful construction; the short filler logs were cut with a tongue that fit into a groove cut into the vertical post. In addition, diagonal bracing at the corners of post-and-fill structures lapped across the post and beam, strengthening the whole building. In this case, however, the diagonal braces were not lapped over the filler logs. Instead, tiny pieces of log were simply stuffed into the small triangular opening (Figure 14). A thick coating of mud plaster applied to both sides of the wall helped keep the filler logs in place.

Another early house, constructed around 1878 and now located at the Pembina Valley Thresher men's Museum near Winkler, exhibits the more commonly used dovetail method of log construction (Figure 15).

With this method the logs were hewn square and the corner notches expertly cut allowing few spaces between the logs. This building also features a variety of carefully constructed joints which suggest that despite its early construction date it was well built and intended to last for some time (Figure 16).

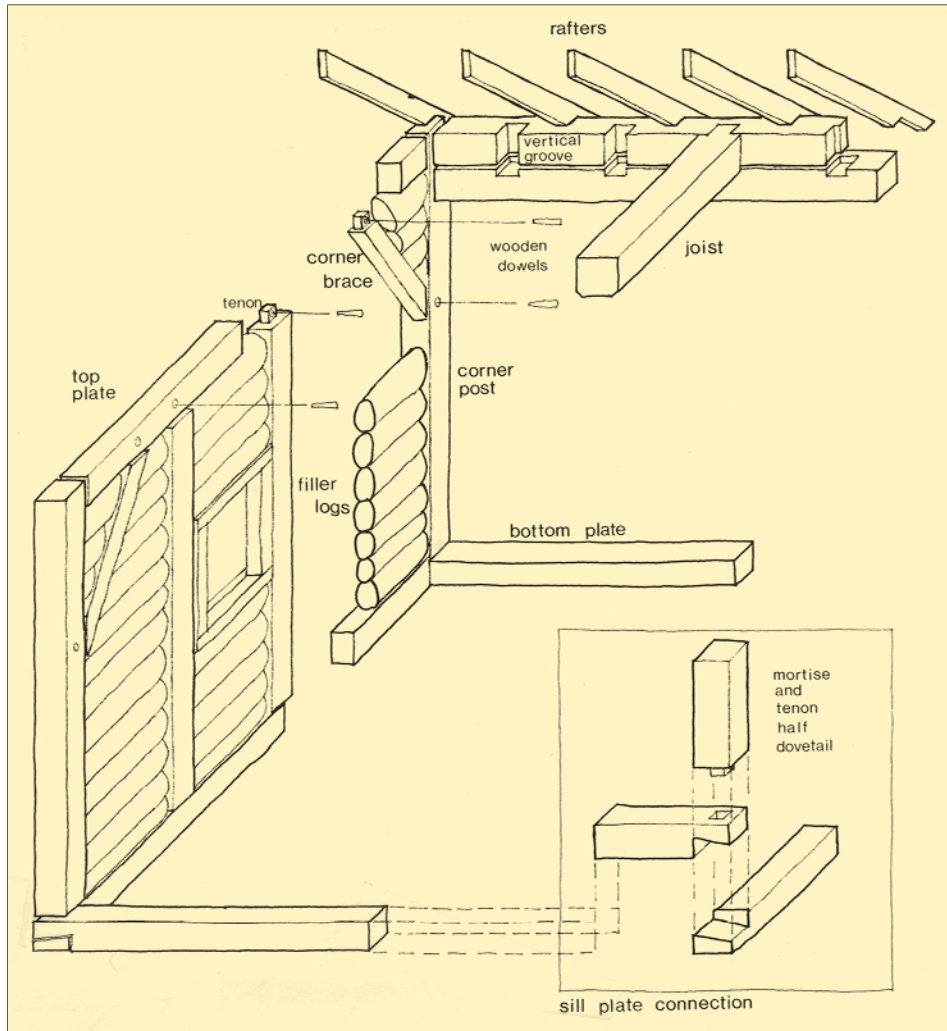


Figure 14
Theissen residence:
construction details.



Figure 15

The majority of early log houses featured the dovetail method of log construction. This example, now a museum piece, is one of the few remaining good examples in the MSTW district.

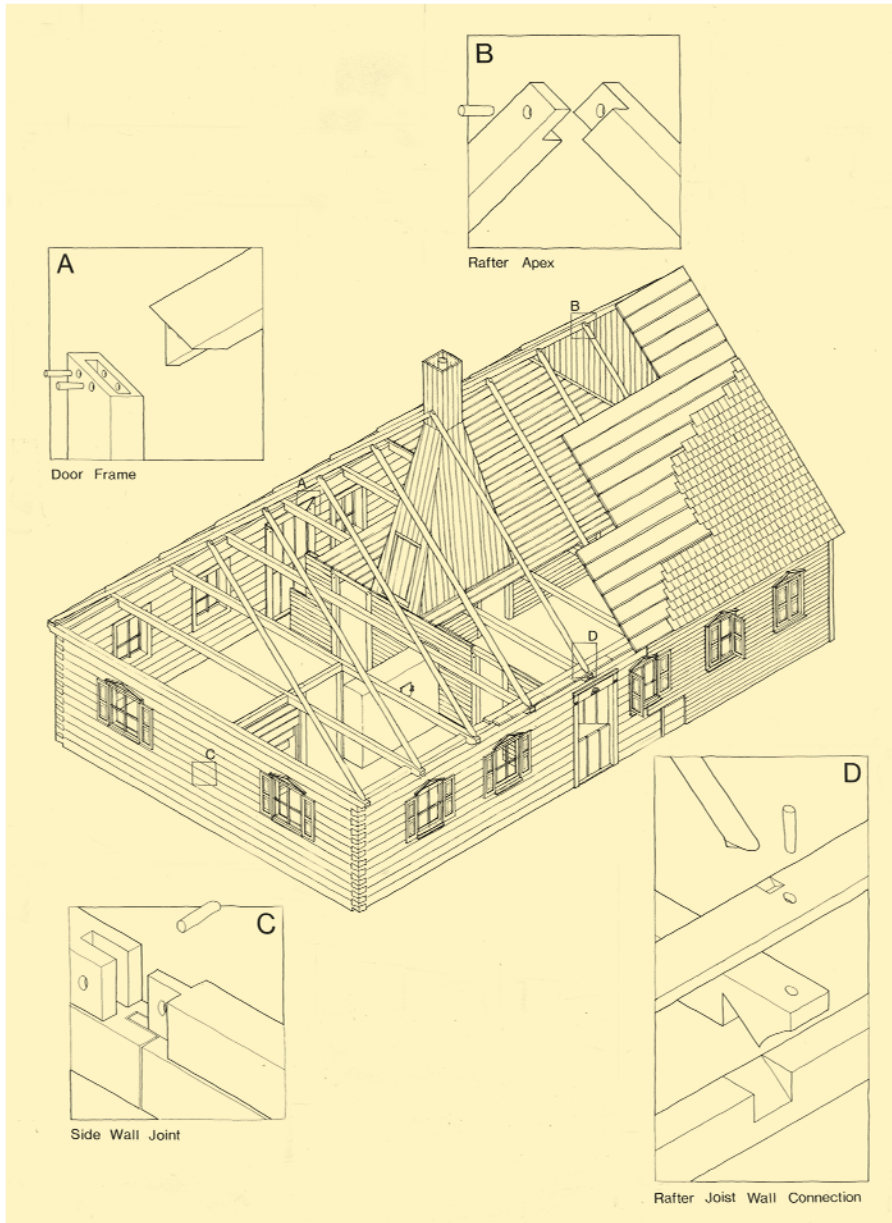


Figure 16

Dovetail log house: construction details. Traditional features like the wooden shutters, brick heater and attic smoker in the illustration, although not currently in the building, were likely once present.

As in most of the early log structures few nails were used in its construction; wooden dowels were used at all the major joints. Although the roof is now sheathed with wooden shingles, the presence of log rafters suggests that it originally had a thatch roof. Although the interior arrangement appears to have been altered, much of the basic structure remains unchanged, witness to the skill of its builder.

Although basic construction methods varied, most of the early log homes were very similar in appearance. Walls were plastered inside and out with a mixture of clay and straw to which a layer of whitewash was applied, Hardening the surface and giving it a more finished appearance. The thick plaster also served to insulate the building, keeping it warm during the winter and cool during the summer months. Roofs were constructed of grass thatch obtained from the edges of sloughs or creek banks. Initially, holes were simply left in the roof for smoke from the cook stove to escape, but before long tin stovepipes were introduced. Often the floors of early homes were of earth, hardened with sour milk and wood shavings. Cut lumber was used sparingly, usually for the ceiling, gable ends, doors, and occasionally for a floor. Since hinges, latches and furniture were normally homemade from logs, the only additional cost, besides lumber, was the cost of a few nails (Figure 17).

Barns were generally added a few years after the house was completed. The few head of stock kept during the early years were housed in the initial sod or thatch shelters until a more secure structure could be built. None of these small early barns still survive in the MSTW District; however, photographs suggest that many of these consisted simply of a small stable area with hay storage in the loft above (Figure 18).



Figure 17
Interior scene of an early Mennonite home, as depicted by a newspaper artist. (Provincial Archives Manitoba.)



Figure 18
An early house/barn unit, ca. 1878. Note the small barn section. (Winkler, 1982: 162.)