

~~ROBLSON, ELLA M.~~

EARLY HOUSES.

#12400

86

ROBINSON, ELLA.

EARLY HOMES.

12400

Ella Robinson
Investigator
December 15, 1937

Houses of Early Indian Territory Days

The Five Civilized Tribes never lived in tepees as did the "Plains Indians," commonly known as the "wild tribes." The first problem that confronted the Eastern Cherokees, after their enforced removal from their comfortable homes to the western country, was that of building houses for temporary shelter. As the country was an unbroken forest the question of material was easily settled.

The man went into the woods and selected straight medium sized trees, and felled them and cut them into uniform length. After a building site had been selected the logs were hauled or "skiked" by oxen to the proposed building site. Oxen were used for hauling more than horses as they were sure footed and could climb the rough hill roads better than horses.

Timber some two feet in diameter was selected from which boards were made. Blocks were then sawed in two or three foot lengths, and by the use of an iron wedge and sledge-hammer, boards some half-inch thick

ROBINSON, W. L. A.

EARLY HOUSES.

12400

2

were split with which the building was covered. Oak, walnut or cedar timber was always used on account of the durability of the wood. A roof made of such boards has been known to last for fifty years without repair. For the flooring either white oak or cottonwood timber was used. They split boards some six feet long, fourteen or sixteen inches wide, and four or five inches thick.

These were called punche ns and were fastened to the sills with pins as nails were not obtainable. Thin boards called clapboards were split and used to make doors and casings. As there were no locks to be had the only fastening on the doors was a wooden latch on the inside. A hole in the door through which a stout string hung was the only needed fastening as there were no thieves to pilfer and steal. The "latch string" hung out all day enabling those on the outside to come in by pulling the string which raised the latch. "Our latch string is out" was a common expression and meant that guest were welcome any time.

When the material was assembled on the building site all the men in the community would gather early in the morning and would work all day, and by sundown the walls of the house would be up and the roof on. These days were known as "a house raising." A dinner consisting of every kind of food available was served by the women at noon and often supper as well, and was followed by a dance at night to which all, from the grandparents to the babies, came. As there was no window glass to be had, openings were left and wooden shutters on the outside were the only way to close them.

A large fireplace and hearth occupied almost one side of the cabin. All the cooking had to be done on the fireplace and the hearth was made very wide and roomy. An iron crane from which one or more pots could be hung was placed over the fire and with bread baked in an oven on the hearth, a meal was easily prepared.

The chimney on the outside was made of small poles and laid in the same manner as the walls of the house and closely daubed and lined with red clay known as fire clay for the reason that the longer it was

ROBINSON, ELLA.

EARLY HOUSES.

12400

4

baked the harder it became; that was called a stick and dirt chimney. The space between the logs in the houses were filled with the same clay. If where two cabins built they were placed facing each other with an open passage between, sometimes called a dog trot. A convenient shelf in the passage fastened to the wall by pegs provided a place for the water bucket over which hung a gourd dipper.

After completing the house in which to live, the attention of the men was turned to providing shelter for their stock. The stables and cribs were constructed of logs built on the same plan as the dwelling house. The passage between was occupied by the farm wagon.

The matter of furniture was another serious problem which had to be solved by the early settlers. As the journey westward had been long and perilous they arrived at their destination with few of their cherished possessions and with little or no furniture.

Bedsteads or bunks were built by fastening two front posts to the floor and the two back posts to the wall. A frame was nailed to the post and the

ROBINSON, ELLA.

EARLY HOUSES.

12400

5

frame was strung with narrow cowhide strips or stout ropes. On this was placed one or two well tanned cowhides, if they could be secured, then a bed tick of home woven cloth filled with dry grass. On the top of this was placed a large feather bed and all wool, hand-woven blankets and coverlids which provided sufficient cover even for the extreme cold weather.

Tables were made on the same principles as the beds with one side fastened to the wall. Chairs, both straight and rockers, were made of white ash with the seats of narrow strips of hickory bark. They were left unfinished and had to be scrubbed once a week with lye-soap and ashes. A long bench was found in many homes to seat the children on at meal time, when not in use it was placed on the front porch for convenience.

The first homes in the Territory were always situated near a spring or stream of running water. Later, when permanent houses were erected, wells were dug and walled with rock from which the water was drawn by two buckets over a windlass.

When the better houses were built the logs collected were larger and hewn on all four sides. By that

ROBINSON, ELLA.

EARLY HOUSES.

12400

time there were sawmills scattered through the country where rough lumber could be had but no dressed or finished lumber. As there was always someone in the country who owned a flatboat several men would go down the Arkansas River, together, to Fort Smith and get the better grades of lumber and the necessary hardware for building. They would float down stream and pole the boat upstream, on their return home, to a convenient landing. Then each man would take his part of the load. Some of the boats were owned jointly by several of the neighbors.

The space between the logs in the walls of the houses were pointed with lime in place of clay, used in the cabins. The big house was usually placed just in front of the cabin and then the cabins were converted into a dining room and kitchen. The new houses were built according to a popular style; two large rooms a story and a half, or two stories in height, and some 18 X 20 feet in size. A wide hall between the rooms and a long porch in front. The entire house, both inside and out, was whitewashed with a solution of lime

ROBINSON, ELLA.

EARLY HOUSES.

12400

7

that gave it a dull white finish. If additional
room was needed side rooms or an ell was extended

at the back. The stairway went up from the hall or
the back porch. Large closets were placed in each
bedroom that provided storage space for bedding.

In the smaller houses there was an attic in
which was stored everything not in use. Even when
the new house was built the kitchen and dining room
were always detached from the main house. That pre-
vented any scent of cooking from pervading the main
house.

In none of the houses were the modern built-in
features of the homes of today. A commodious pantry
with ample shelf room adjoined the kitchen in which
groceries and fruit, both canned and dried, were put.

Walnut timber was always used for the inside
woodwork; first for the durability and then for the
beautiful finish it took when polished by hand. The
fireplaces and chimneys were made of native stone
and many of the Indians were skilled stone workmen.

ROBINSON, ELLA.

EARLY HOUSES.

12400

8

As no cooking had to be done in the new houses the fireplaces were more artistic and the walnut mantels a thing of beauty.

As the country progressed and business increased, steamboats brought building material to Fort Gibson and dealers throughout the country bought their supplies there and freighted them overland to their respective places of business or homes.

Good substantial furniture was then being made by hand. Dining tables, chest of drawers, wardrobes, as well as small pieces of furniture, were in many homes and scattered throughout the country today can occasionally be found a piece of that furniture.

Plastered and papered walls were unheard of luxuries in this country. The entire interior of a house would be sealed with carefully selected ceiling boards fitted closely together. Wainscoting was a popular finish for halls and dining rooms. Almost all the houses were white with the window shutters a vivid green.

Set in a spacious yard, surrounded by a grove of forest trees, it presented an appearance of comfort

ROBINSON, ELLA.

EARLY HOUSES.

12400

9

and contentment. The houses that were left with the outside walls unfinished took on a soft grey color that in the latter year some have tried to duplicate when attempting to give a building an antique appearance.

With the era of better homes came the lightning-rods. They were sold throughout the country by agents that were so persistent that often it was said that a sale was made just to get rid of the agent. To out-talk a lightning-rod agent was an impossibility. The rods were placed some two feet off the comb of the house, and to make them more attractive, or for some other purpose, they were adorned with bright silvery balls that glistened in the sunshine and made them rather attractive, especially did the children admire them. A ground wire at the corner of the house was supposed to conduct the electricity from the atmosphere into the ground thereby insuring safety for the building in time of storm. The lightning-rods with the agents had their day and passed into oblivion.

While building stone was plentiful, very little

ROBINSON, ELLA.

EARLY HOUSES.

12400

10

was used in the construction of dwellings. However, almost all public buildings and business houses were built of stone and some are standing today that were erected when the Indians first came to this country.

With the coming of statehood and the influx of the white people to the Indian country, new styles of architecture were introduced, and the comfortable old country homes were replaced with new buildings more modern in appearance but not so substantial. Occasionally an old Indian Territory farmhouse can be found through the country but many have lost their attractiveness in an attempt to improve them. With the passing of the early day houses went the fine spirit that characterized the people who occupied them.