

## Métis Housing<sup>1</sup>

By Audreen Hourie and Lawrence Barkwell

Prior to sawmills being established at Red River in 1870, the Métis made their homes from squared logs. Early cabins were made from round logs notched at the corners and laid horizontally (*pièce sur pièce*). They then started squaring and cutting the ends of the corner logs to form a dovetail joint. Eventually the whole log was squared. The dovetail notching gave rigidity to buildings. This provided enough strength to allow for two story house construction. Early cabins had earthen or thatched roofs. Later, shingles replaced this form.

Eventually, in St. Boniface, the method was known as *poteaux sur sole* (posts in the sill) became common for house construction. This consisted of horizontal squared logs slid into grooves between squared uprights, which were planted by means of mortises into heavy squared logs forming a frame or a sill for a foundation. The spaces between the logs were filled with stone, clay or straw.



The types of wood used in constructing a Métis log house depended upon what was readily available. White poplar and tamarack were two of the commonly used woods. White poplar has a low density with many air pockets, providing better insulation. Tamarack was considered superior to poplar because of its straightness, which reduced the amount of chinking that had to be done. The real advantage of straight logs, however, is that they provide greater wall strength, which depends on the fit and security of the logs. A primary advantage of tamarack pine for log walls is its resistance to rot. This was particularly important for foundation logs if they were directly in contact with the ground. Most houses had the rows of logs pegged together near the wall centre to increase strength and stability. Similarly, door and window frames were pegged in place due to the shortage and expense of nails. The home pictured above is the Andre Nault homestead (Public Archives of Manitoba, N19472)

The outside walls of Métis homes were covered with mud and straw plaster and often white-washed. Many of the early homes were one story one or two room structures. A lean-to addition was frequently attached to the rear or side of the house and this served as a kitchen.

Louis Goulet, born along the Red River in 1859, gives this description of the family home at St. Norbert.<sup>2</sup>

*Our house, like all the others at that time in St. Norbert, was built from logs well squared-off with a large axe and held superimposed by tenon and mortise joints and what we called in those days a 'dovetail'. It was one and a half stories high, two times longer than wide and covered with earth and straw. The chimney was made from long poles which we*

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<sup>1</sup> From: Barkwell, L.J., L.M. Dorion and A. Hourie. *Métis Legacy, Volume Two: Michif Culture, Heritage and Folkways*. Saskatoon, Gabriel Dumont Institute, Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 2007: 65-69.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Goulet in Guillaume Charette, *Vanishing spaces: Memoires of a Prairie Métis*. Winnipeg: Editions Bois-Brûlés, 1976: 3-4.

*called 'wood-shoots' ranging from 10 to 12 feet high. These poles were straight and planted side by side, and were covered, from the inside and outside, with thick clay mortar. It was used to heat and light the room. The windows were squares of dried rawhides which tried hard to let the sun rays and moon rays penetrate into the room.*

*The woodwork: the frames, the chassis, the doors, the floors, and furniture were home-made and fashioned with a 'crooked' knife. Ordinarily only the parents slept together in one bed; the children slept each night rolled up in buffalo hide robes laid on the bare ground or on the floor if there was one.*

Métis family homes also reflected the intergenerational living arrangements of families. Anne Carrière Acco provides the following description.

*The older Métis houses were built in clusters. The sleeping quarters "en haut" or "e-spimik" were built into a huge loft area. Mom and Dad had a bedroom downstairs. One of the Grandpa's had a suite right next to the kitchen but across from the main block. A trunk with all his important possessions, and always his own grub box, were arranged nearby. He had his own stove with a kettle always ready for tea, a small but serviceable table big enough for two people and an extra bed for the grandchild who slept there. Attached to our square house there was a cooking area that served as a porch in the dead of winter, and inside was a large all-purpose room where visitors were received.*

Further west, in Montana, Métis housing reflected the materials available in that location. Vern Dusenberry gives a good description of how the Métis lived.

*In the settlements, they lived in one-story houses, often gaudily painted. While on the plains hunting, they used tents. Frequently, however, their hunts took them far to the west, particularly along the Milk River in Montana, and since the distance was too great for them to return to the Red River but occasionally, the Métis built frontier cabins, generally of cottonwood there. They plastered the interior with clay mixed with buffalo hair, and, in one end of the building, they always built a fireplace, likewise cemented with clay. Scraped skins of buffalo calves, carefully worked until they were translucent covered the windows. Floors were left bare. Just as their Indian ancestors placed their tepees in a circle, so did the Métis build their cabins, but in the centre of the enclosure they built a large structure with puncheon floors. These larger buildings were primarily used for dancing.<sup>3</sup>*

#### **A number of different log-notching methods were used in house construction:**

**Saddle Notch:** A saddle notch has a rounded notch in the bottom of the log a short distance from the end. The notching allows the log to fit over the top of the log immediately below. Although this design is easier to construct, saddle notches do not self-lock and the resulting structure is

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<sup>3</sup> Vern Dusenberry, "Waiting for a Day that Never Comes," *Western History*, Vol. 8 1958: 26-39.

weaker than those that use a dovetail notch. (upper picture below)

**Dog Notch:** A dog notch is similar to a saddle notch, except that it is the top rather than the bottom of the log that is notched. Subsequent logs can be quickly fitted into a dog notch, thus speeding construction. Dog notches are not self-draining and are thus subject to rot.

**Wedge Notch:** A wedge notch is “V” shaped and similar in most cases to the saddle notch. (lower picture below)

**Square Notch:** A square notch is a thinning at the end of the log that overlaps the bottom log. These are inherently unstable.

**Dove Tail Notch:** A dovetail is a joint formed by one or more tenons in the shape of a dove’s tail, fitting into the mortises of corresponding shape. The rows alternate, with tenon rows being placed upon mortised rows. This is the strongest most stable design.



Before sheet glass was readily available the Métis were quite inventive in creating windows for their cabins. The most common window was made from parchment. To make parchment the hide of a young deer is scraped very thin, then stretched tightly across a window when wet. When this dried it was as taut as a drum and would let in an amazing amount of light. Another common alternative was to use flour sacks or parchment paper (oiled

paper) for windows. A less known alternative for windows was fish swim bladders. The swim bladder from the sturgeon could be split down the middle, stretched and dried, as one would do with a beaver skin, then used as a window.

The floors of Métis homes were usually covered with colourful hooked or braided rugs. These braided mats were made from strips of old clothes braided together into lengths, which were then coiled into a circular form. The Métis made brooms by taking about 100 flexible, tapered willow ends, about two feet in length, and tying them in a bundle around a wooden pole. Goose wings were also used as whisk brooms. Rita Cullen recalls living in a road allowance house at High Bluff, Manitoba that had packed earth floors covered with braided mats. It was the girls' chore to regularly sweep the floor with goose wing whisks.



This is a photo of Grant Anderson at Libau, Manitoba with a typical 12 x 12 (3.7 metre x 3.7 metre) Métis log home. This house is over 110 years old and the liming on the walls has aided its preservation greatly.



Audreen Hourie at “Hourie House,” Fort LaReine, Portage la Prairie, Manitoba

Below

Jean Baptiste Page and Family at their old home. The late Mike Page, Master Métis fiddler, is the boy on the right, Turtle Mountain, N.D., Aug. 14, 1940. Turtle Mountain Chippewa Heritage Centre, Belcourt, N.D.

