

# Settlement

SOD HOUSE  
AT THE  
PRAIRIE  
MUSEUM  
OF  
ART  
AND  
HISTORY



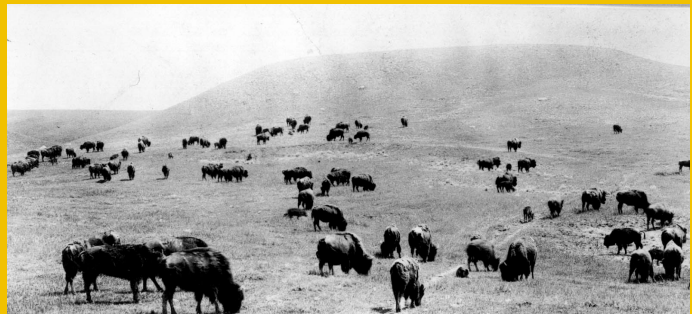
## The Homestead Act

Europeans and Americans from further east were drawn to the Plains by the lure of free land. The Homestead Act of 1862 encouraged settlement by allowing any individual to claim 160 acres free and clear if he or she lived on and farmed the claim for five years.

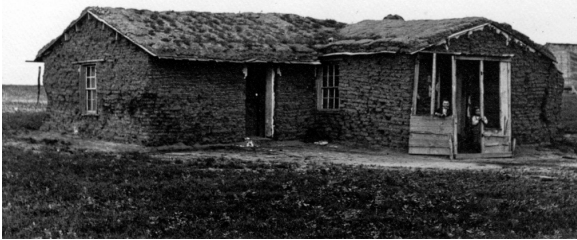
This offer seemed too good to pass up. Adventurers, people who were looking for a new start, and those who couldn't afford to buy land were attracted to the western Plains.



Before the first encroachment of white settlers, Thomas County was home to the Cheyenne, Arapahoe and the American Bison or buffalo. The buffalo was essential to the existence of the Native Americans. The buffalo provided food and shelter for the Indians, and the Indian honored the buffalo by wasting little of their valuable bodies. It was this delicate and carefully maintained balance between the Indians and the buffalo that was exploited by those who wished to open the lands between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains for settlement.



Starting in 1873, the great buffalo hunt began in this area. An estimated 1,500 white hunters, skinners, and camp cooks came to clear the buffalo off the land. Some meat was put to use, but most were killed only for their valuable hides and tongues or just for the sport of it. The slaughter went on for five years in Western Kansas and by 1878 all that remained were a few rotting carcasses and old sun bleached bones.



Among those who came out to Thomas County to homestead were two women, Melissa Alger and Alice Williams, who took out neighboring claims, built their soddies on adjoining corners of their respective lands, and alternated spending their nights in each other's homes for company and safety.

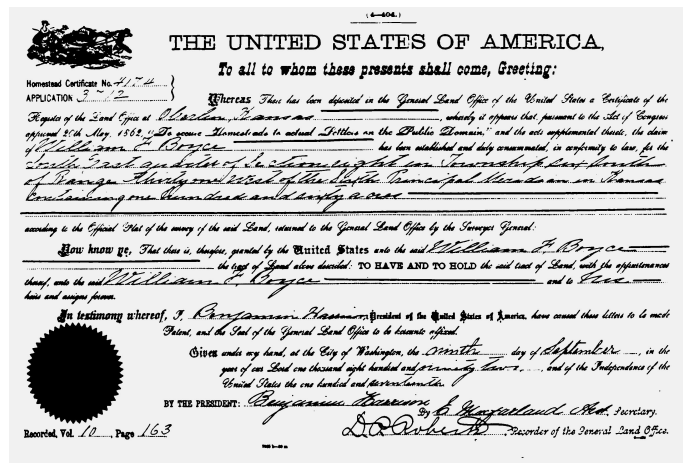
"We had two beds for the adults and two trundle beds for us children. The trundle beds were pushed under the big beds in the day time and brought out at night for us to sleep on."- Mrs. Marion Moore James, Bill: **Sod House Pioneers**

### The Soddie

Why would anyone want to build a home out of dirt? When settlers arrived in this part of the Great Plains in the 1870s, that's all there was. There weren't many trees. Lumber could be brought in on the railroad, but it was expensive and the nearest railroad station might be two or three days away from your homestead site. Often the first dwelling was a small dugout carved out of a hillside, so the sod home seemed like an improvement.

The sod house could be built quickly and cheaply. The only wood required was for the door and window frames and the roof. If you had enough money, you'd get the lumber for these purposes, which was still a lot cheaper than building a wood frame house. If you didn't have the money, your roof and framing would be made out of such trees as you could find along streams. There were other advantages be-

sides the low cost of construction. The thick sod walls kept the house cool in the summer and made it easy to heat in the winter. And you would be far better off in a soddie during a prairie fire than you would in a frame house.



"We had a dirt floor in the dugout and at night when we started to go to bed the fleas were so bad we would stand on chairs to remove our clothing before getting into bed." -Thomas G. Patten, Wingo, Wayne: **The History of Thomas County**



Of course, there were drawbacks. Unless you could afford to put tarpaper on the roof, the roof would typically continue dripping for two or three days after a good rain. And uninvited guests like bugs, mice and the occasional snake dropped in now and then from the ceiling unannounced.



### Making a Living

Some of the ways early settlers earned money while waiting for their first crop to ripen included collecting and selling the



"We gathered buffalo bones and sold them for a living, as there was nothing else for us to make a living at. When we first came here, there were buffalo bones everywhere you looked, and we could fill our wagon in no time. Father would get up early in the morning and drive to Grinnell, our nearest trading post, 25 miles away, to sell the bones. At first they were only \$1 a ton; then as they began to get scarce they kept going up until they were \$18 a ton."  
Mrs. Viola Chelf, Colby KS, **Colby Tribune**, 1910

The treeless landscape of western Kansas seemed vast and intimidating to many pioneers on first sight but the rich soil and endless grassland proved productive for both farmer and cattleman. The soil was suitable for crops such as corn, milo and rye; and the native buffalo grass made a hearty meal for cattle. Water, however, was the main source of concern and hard ship. Originally, homes were built near steams and springs where shallow wells could be dug for water. The water from these wells was obtained by dipping an oak bucket attached to a rope and pulley into the well and hauled to the house for the animals. Later, windmill powered wells permitted homes farther from the creek beds to have a constant water supply. Those with good wells shared their wealth with others and in doing so met many folks stopping in to water their horses and stock. Early pioneers also had to be creative in the ways in which they provided shelter for their families. With lumber so hard to come by, the pioneers built their homes out of sod. Sod was also used to build schools, churches and barns.

many buffalo and cattle bones that dotted the prairie. These were shipped back east and ground into fertilizer.



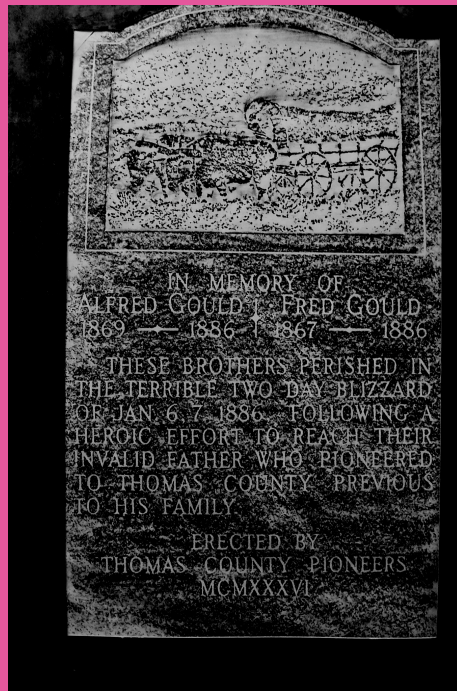
Wild horses in the area were sometimes rounded up and sold as another source of income. Those who kept a few chickens or milk cows could earn money selling any extra eggs and butter.

## To Stay or to Go

Proving up a claim wasn't as easy as it might have seemed at first. Five years was a long time when any given year might bring drought, hail, grasshoppers, or blizzards. Cattle ranged freely and settlers had to protect their crops from them, not to mention keep them from rubbing against the corners of their soddies and weakening the structure.

Loneliness and the stark landscape proved a struggle for many who were used to living in towns and among trees. After two or three years of this, even the hardiest of the pioneers might ask themselves whether the "free" land was worth the cost. It was a difficult decision. If they left before they proved up on their land, they left with less than they started, having run through whatever cash they brought with them. On the other hand, if they stayed their five years and were able to claim their 160 acres as their own, the trying climate meant they might have land but no crop some years.

"Along with the rest of our trouble the grasshoppers came and ate up everything we had growing. They ate the corn blades off the stalk and then took the stalk. I have seen them flying in the air so thick we couldn't see the sun."  
Viola Chelf, **Colby Tribune**,  
1910



Alfred and Fred Gould  
These two boys, aged 17 and 19 with their mother, had come from Oberlin in a wagon, bringing their household goods, their destination being their father's claim in the western part of the county. On Wednesday morning they left Colby, arriving at the residence of J.D. Hughs, twelve miles west before the storm commenced. Here they decided to stay for the night putting up their

team and eating supper. After supper the boys decided to walk to the claim, a distance of four miles, to spend the night with their father, taking with them a lantern. They went the direction of the claim but the storm being so severe, turned them and they went with the storm leaving their lantern within a few feet of a deserted sod house. On Friday search parties were sent out, but the search developed nothing until Sunday at 11 o'clock when the bodies were discovered by Sheriff Kingery, about four miles south of their father's claim.

A jury was summoned and verdict "Frozen to death" was pronounced. The boys were the main support of their parents, and it leaves them in hard circumstances, the father having been an invalid for several years. They were known as hard working and honest and the manner of their death, so sudden and they not yet in the prime of life makes one of the saddest of happenings. The remains of both were interred in one grave on Monday.

These boys were buried in the Kingery township cemetery on what is now the Showalter ranch between Levant and Brewster and N-40 and Rock Island Railroad and the graves can be seen from both the highway and the railroad.

From **Golden Jubilee**, 1935

Rubbing from headstone in Showalter Hills

The railroad interest in settlement was to sell company land and to build up business along their lines. During the 1870s the Union Pacific advertised that railroad and homestead land could be obtained in large blocks enabling communities to lay out town sites. Local businessmen and newspaper editors boosted their communities in the most glowing terms. Settlers believed that the railroad was the key to economic development. By 1880, Northwest Kansas was the western edge of the frontier. Farmers were homesteading in small groups and communities. Some towns were already well established especially those along the railway. When the Missouri Pacific reached Stockton, Kansas in 1885, a local farmer recorded in his diary that it was certainly "a grand achievement for the people of this part of Kansas" and ended with a "Whoop La Hurrah."



The coming of the railroad in 1887 was instrumental in the development of Thomas County. The railroads brought needed supplies to the western frontier and aided the settler in getting his products to market. Many towns in western Kansas were dependent on the railroads and did not survive after the railroads passed them by. An important means of transportation in the early days was the stage coach. By 1886 a Colby and Oberlin Stage Line made a daily eight hour trip loaded with mail, passengers and merchandise.



Before Colby was established in 1886, people had to travel to Grinnell, Oakley or Oberlin for supplies, usually a two or three day journey.

"By night the family had reached Halfway House at Hawkeye where travelers between Oberlin and Colby might find shelter. The Halfway House was located north of Rexford, Kansas, and though the accommodations were rather scant in 1886, it was possible to get a room where one's own bedding could be spread down."

Mrs. S. R. Epard, Colby James, Bill: **Sod House Pioneers**



Some people ran out of money before they got a decent crop to sell. Others just got tired of the struggle. They moved on, or moved back home. Those who stayed helped create the communities we live in today.

The farm population increased greatly during the 1880s. The Oberlin Land Office which opened in 1881 had 6,000 claims filed in the summer of 1885. The greatest expansion of the middle 1880s was in the non-farm sector. Communities sprang up overnight, all with the hope of the railroad passing through their town. Bonds were put up in order to secure them. Speculation in town lots and investments in public and commercial buildings were part of the boom. Otterbourne which was laid by Mary Hay known as Auntie May Hay. She was a doctor and teacher. The town did not survive.



## SOD HOUSE



The sod home at the Prairie Museum of Art and History was built by volunteers in 1984. It is typical of the one room sod homes that was common to the pioneer family on the Western Kansas prairie in the late 19th Century.

Out in front of the sod home you will see a sod cutter. Many of the sled-type sod cutters were homemade. The blade ran underneath the sod, cutting a continuous strip about a foot wide and four inches thick. An iron instrument was used to cut the sod into 2 foot lengths. The sod was cut wet and each block would weigh about 50 pounds. Settlers would only cut the amount of sod that they could put up each

day so that the sod stayed moist. The sod blocks were laid side by side to form the two foot sod walls and then alternated every other or every third layer for stability.

Blocks were always placed grass side down to allow the builder to level the blocks. Space was left for the door and the windows, with the windows usually set to the outside



of the thick sod walls and the door recessed leaving an alcove-type entryway. Wood was used to build the roof and finished with a layer of tar paper and sod. There was no set pattern for building a sod house. With such thick walls, the sod house was warm in winter and cool in the summer and served well as a refuge from raging prairie fires. When it did rain, the muddy water simply poured through the roof, which caused the settlers their great-

est discomforts. Of course, bugs, small rodents and occasional snakes were nuisances. Women would often drape muslin across the ceiling to prevent these creatures from falling into food or onto sleeping family members.



At first many sod homes had dirt floors and unfinished walls. Later wooden floors were added and the walls were plastered. A well built sod home would last 20-50 years but as times got better and the family could afford to purchase wood, frame homes were built and eventually the sod home disappeared from the prairie.

The latch string door and earthy smell, takes you back to pioneer life--in one room. In the corner is the pie safe where fresh baked pies and cakes cooled. The tub under the window was used, not only to wash clothes, but also for bathing. The clothes stomper and



scrub board in the tub were the settlers' only means of cleaning the gritty prairie dirt out of their clothing. A warm stove

was a necessity during the bitterly cold winter. Fueling the stove, however, could have been a problem on the treeless plains.

Though trees were scarce, buffalo and cattle chips were not. The dried chips with their unique heady odor were simply gathered and burned as fuel. Feather beds were brought from the the East but pioneer women soon found that filling the mattress



with prairie grasses made a light weight, soft and sweet smelling bed. The

piano was a great source of entertainment. Family members and their neighbors spent hours around the piano, or other musical instruments, playing and singing hymns, patriotic and popular songs.



This piano is a true pioneer for it made its way to Thomas County in a covered wagon with Dr. V.C. Eddy in 1887-88 and was donated by Amy Stewardson.





The following is a diary that was written by Ammi Rogers Pattison in 1885. (Eva Pattison)Hochstetler, his daughter of San Jose, Calif. has the original diary, but thoughtful of our history preservation, sent us a copy. We feel it is a treasure. We know you will enjoy reading the thoughts of a young man while he was working on the plains of Kansas, in and near Colby in 1885. (The spelling and phraseology are as he wrote it.)

Ammi Rogers Pattison was born in New York in 1862. In his reminiscing in the winter of 1922, two years before he died, Mr. Pattison writes that he lived in New York until 1880. He spent time working in the pineries in Michigan, visited relatives in Illinois and on to Fairbury Neb.

"I did not know all of this time where I was going to stop, but I knew I was going west. I went to Oberlin, Kansas, where there was a Government Land Office. That was my first introduction to sod houses, dugouts, buckin broncoes and burning buffalo chips for fuel. There was a rush for homesteads."

"I took a claim in the then open and unsettled County of Thomas, a barren, open prairie county, with only occasionally a cattle ranch miles and miles apart, and it was said there was only one native tree ever grew in the county and it had been cut down by cattle men before I came there."

"I got a job and rode the range. That summer the town of Colby was laid out. There were lots of wild horses and antelope. That year we organized the country and made Colby the county seat. Colby was a little place of a few shacks with a town pump and a windmill in the center of the street. Old Doc Edwards, then over eighty years old and still practicing medicine, cast the first vote in the county. Mine was the sixth. I lived there and broke out my claim with a yoke of oxen. In the spring of 1889, I sold my claim."

**August 20, 1885**

Dear parents and brother: I take this privilage of writing you a few lines to let you know how I am getting along. I am as well as common and hope this will find you the same. The Indians have not killed me yet nor I am not drouned by the floods nor the Cyclones have not blown me away but poverty compels me to write to you on my Count-book leaves and with a lead pencil but maby I will get thare some day so that I can write oftener and on better paper. It is most a Beautiful morning it is now 8 o'clock, the sun is shining Bright and thare is not a Cloud' fo be seen in' the skies. (A page is missing here.)

Oh how thare Could, be in any Other it fills me with joy and I am proud of my Country and of my home for I feal that I shall always be Content to stay in this Beautifull Sunny land and make it my home for life. I never have

given you much Idea about our Country because I thought I would Wait and see if I Continued to like it but this is such a Beautifull morn-ing and the Poneys are grazing so quiet that I could not help drawing out my pencil and giving you a little Historical sketch of it as I lay here on this beautifull prairie. And feal as Rich as a king atthough I am not Rich in gold I am Rich with the joy and frea-dom and pride of our Sunny Kansas. Although I have had verry bad luck in the past 3 weeks and have had the blues some, I could not retain them long in this moderin Garden of Eden. My hart is so full of praizes for the beauties of this my home this morning that I believe that I could write a good history of it and if you do not tire of Reading it I will give you a little Dis-cription of it now and maby a better one some day.

I will now give you a little history of our town Colby, situated at the head of the beautifull Prairie Dog Creek just 3 miles from my Home-stead. The twelvth of March last when I took my Claim thair was no town thair nor no talk of a town yet nor untill the 15th of May when they held a meating for the purpos of seeing whare the County seat would be, they decided on that place for it is just in the Center of the County. The 20th of May the first building has started. And today thare is 2 large Hotells and too liv-ery Barns eather of them as large as D. C. Crances. One

large double Store and 3 grocery stores and one single dry goods store, 2 Blacksmiths shops, 2 hardware stores and Land Offices and dwelling houses to numerous to mention and boasts of 400 inhabitants. How is that for a town of 3 months growth and 20 miles from a R.R.

And I am verry thankfull I can tell you for getting the County seat so near to my Claim for there is prospects of a large City there. I suppose that you will say that you would not want to live there when I tell you that I have not seen a train of Cars nor heard a steam whistle of ant kind since the 11th of March last but that has no affect on me. I like it just as well there is a R.R. surveyed and staked out through our town Colby but I dont know whether it will go through this fall or not. They are grading one through Oberlin now that is to be Done the 15th of Oct. You will probily wonder at me speaking of Oberlin and Colby as if they wer not far apart, when I tell you that they are 53 mile apart, but we think no more of Driving it or getting on to horse and going from one to the other here than you would of going to Oswego there. You will probily wonder at me calling this a moderin Garden of Eden but if you were to be blind folded and Braught here not knowing where you was going and set down here in the month of May or June when the cactus of the several different kindes and the Prickley

Pears and the Prarie was covered with its milions of diferent flowers and they were all in blossom you would think you was eather in the Real Garden of Eden or in James Vicks flower garden. As an old man said that came to Oberlin a few days ago he said does it seam possible that nature or the Work of Gods hand has done so much for this Country in the page 30 years for he passed through here 30 years ago going to California. I would like to give you the history of this Country North Western Kansas that he told and that others here know to be true but you are probily tired of reading now or probily have some thing to do that will profit you more and so I will omit it this time for I do not wish to tire you of my praises of my beautifull Home this time. But it does surprise me to here from mouths that I cannot Disbelieve of the great Change that this Country has undergone in just 30 years.

Well it is now just 1 oclock and I have just eat my lunch. I did think that I would not write any more but as the poneys are quiet and I have read all the books and papers through that I could get hold of since I have bin hearing I thought that I might as well just put my time in today writing so if you are tired reading so much you can lay it away and wait till you get rested or get more time and then finish it if you are amind to.

Well I suppose that this is my last day hearing for a while for Sunday I am going down to my Claim to put up my house next weak. I did not tell you what my bad luck was yet but I will now. Just before the Forth of July I bought me as pretty a little span of Wild mares as you ever saw. They are Red Roans and look so near alike that you could not tell them apart. I told you about them in my last letter. I had not Broke them yet for I had not had time. But about three weaks ago one of them got loose and went away. She went South and I have not seen her since and there is not one chance out of 100000 that I ever will again. Although I lament my loss I am not discouraged yet for I am determined to try again. it is hard to loose anything that way after working and saving as I have.

**October 29** - Well today finds me at noon about 30 miles from Oberlin South. I am now laying on the prairie letting my horse graze and I thought that I would add a few lines to my little book. I am not fealing verry well today but I thought that I must go to my Claim and so I am going a round about way so as to look for my horse. I am going South of Oberlin about 50 miles till I strike the Soliman River then S.West up the River about 40 miles then North about 10 miles to my Claim. A pretty long ride in a saddle for a fellow with a great big boil on his\_\_\_\_\_for it

just about kills me every step that the pony takes.

Well, about the Country around here it is splendid, just as level as a house floor. This is in Sheridan County and a nice County it is too. I am now on the Devide between the prairie Dog Creek and the Soliman River. It is pretty new around here. I have now rode about 12 miles since I have seen a house. Well my pony has eat long enough I guess for this time and I must get on my Boil and go for I must reach the Soliman tonight and it is pretty warm, so good by till I meat you all again.

**October 30th, 1885** - Well here we are again but with an awful sore for that boil has swollen dreadfull from yesterdays ride. It is now biger nor my fist and O how sore it is. It is noon, again and although I am about sick I cannot help drawing out my little book and pencil and giving you a little sketch of the butifull seanry around me although I feel so sore and lame that it seams as if could hardly sit, only I cannot help but admire the beautiful scenery that surrounds me on every side as I sit here letting my pony graze on the bank of the Soliman River.

At my right is a large Prairie Dog town 4 miles one way and 2 the other and the dogs are all out barking and making such a nois that I can hardly here myself think but the pretty little things are so happy this beautiful, sunny day that I cannot blame them

for that. They are capering around and playing with each other and I cannot help but think what a site it would be to you all to see the thousands of those little animals in such a frolic. But that is not all, for just now I spied an Antilope to add to the beauty of the seen skip by at my back about 40 rods from me. Thare he has stopped and sits up and looks at me in wonder. Now he has skipped off again right through the dog town and you had aught to see the dogs run and jump in their holes. And at my left about a mile is a large heard of cattle and in front of me is the sparkling waters of the Soliman R. and about tend rods up is a flock of ducks and they are enjoying their bath so that they do not seam to notis me.

I stayed last night at a house that the mans name was Lumis. They are from P .A. near Ery and nice folks they are too and they have a large cattle ranch. I tell you it is luckey for me that I did not have to camp out last night for we had quite a wind storm and it rained awful hard.

Well again I must bid you fare well till some other time and get on my boil and travel for I have got about 30 miles to make this afternoon to get to Colby. So good by for this time but be shure and call again.

## Expences

The following notations were in the back of the notebooks:

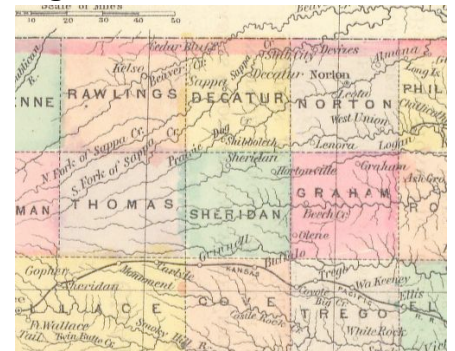
April	
19	1/2 lb tobacco 25
19	1 pair shirts 93
26	1 cigar 5
May	
3	2 cigars 10
3	peanuts 5
3	1 pair of shoes 150
3	2 lbs maple shug 25
3	1/2 lb tobacco 25
3	payed for making shirt 50
3	1 pair overalls 5
10	6 cigarete 5
13	1/2 lb tobacco 25
13	1 postage stamp 2
17	1 pair shoe socks 240
17	1 sack tobaco 8
17	3 oranges 6
17	candy 2
17	livery rig 150
17	1lb tobaco 34

Work for F. Anderson at \$20 per month

Worked 65 days	\$50
taken up	<u>\$13.55</u>
	100

Due to me	<u>\$36.45</u>
	100

(signed) Ammi R. Pattison



Prairie Museum of Art + History  
Thomas County Historical Society  
1905 S. Franklin  
Colby, KS 67701  
785 460-4590  
[www.prairiemuseum.org](http://www.prairiemuseum.org)