

# Crooked walls add character to sod home

My name is Marie Weeden Holzwarth. I was born in a sod house in 1930. It was on a farm about 19 miles southwest of St. Francis. It was homesteaded by my grandpa, George Weeden, and then owned by my parents, Lloyd and Vinnie Weeden.

The house was a sod and frame house built by my grandpa. Of the six children in our family four were born in the sod house. My oldest brother Vern was born in Harrison, Ark. Virgil, Mildred, Audrey and myself were born in the sod house. The sod part consisted of two rooms and the frame part was one room. My parents lived in the house from late in December 1908 until sometime in 1930.

I don't know the exact date but sometime after I was born they bought a new house. It had five rooms but no water or electricity. Although I didn't live in the sod house then, I was there most every day as it was right in the yard and my brother, wife and family lived there. My niece was only two years younger than I was and she had a younger sister. My youngest brother Gaylen was born in the new house.

I was six years old and went to school one day and came home and had a baby brother. I sure was surprised I didn't even know we were expecting one. My home was the new house for 16 years. Then I married Alvin Holzwarth and instead of progress I was back to living in a sod and frame house which was built by his father George Holzwarth.

The original house consisted of two rooms of sod. The walls were two feet thick and had two rooms upstairs. Later a large kitchen, pantry, closet and small bedroom was built on to accommodate the large family of 11 children. All of

them were born in the bedroom of the sod house. When I came there we lived with Alvin's parents for seven months and then they moved to town. The sod part of the house had wallpaper and it needed new paper. Neither of us knew much about papering. Matching the pattern and mixing the glue was two things we didn't know about but soon found out how important they were. First of all after scraping the loose paper we found the walls were dirt.

Alvin had so many sisters he had never helped with the papering. I picked a pretty paper but never thought how hard it would be to match on crooked walls and almost round corners. We bought some glue that was powder and had to be mixed with water. We did the chores early, moved out the furniture and started.

It was so much harder than we expected but we struggled through the day. That night we heard a strange sound and got up to look. The wallpaper was rolling down the walls. Some of it halfway, other parts were a long way down. We were horrified all our hard work and money which was very scarce was wasted. The next day we called Alvin's mother and she told us we had to cook the paste which we needed to make with flour and water. Did you ever try to cook a dish pan of goop? Well don't.

We cooked some paste and tried to glue the paper back up. We patched it up as best we could. I had ordered from a catalogue and it would take a long time to get more paper. So we learned to live with it. This room was our front room (name for living room now).

After some time the north wall in this room developed a big crack under the window we thought we were out of a house. The dirt



**GEORGE HOLZWARTH FARM in 1915. George Holzwarth, with the help of his brother, John, built the house in 1907. George married Julia in 1908 and brought her from South Dakota to this home. The two rooms are made of sod and still lived in today. It has been added onto. The sod is preserved by the cement plastered over it.**

just kept crumbling down. Finally Alvin took the wheelbarrow and mixed it full of cement and tried to push the cement into the hole. It ran right out, so he made it stiffer. He finally managed to get it shut and put a board over it and propped it up tight. Thank the good Lord it stayed.

Alvin had his cousin come out and put a coat of plaster over the walls. We could paint, no more paper in this room, but we still had the bedroom. We took all the loose paper off and found these

walls not near as bad as the other ones. But they were still dirt. Alvin put a thin coat of plaster over them. They were not nice enough to paint.

By then I had gotten smarter in choosing an easier wall paper pattern and we knew how to make the white paste goop. Still it was a challenge. The walls were not even and the corners gave us a lot of problems, but at least the paper didn't come rolling down. Alvin was very sure anyone who wanted papered walls had to be crazy.

We put ceiling tiles in both rooms to cover the original wainscoting which was a terror to paint but probably should have been left to be more authentic. The two foot wide window sills were a great place for house plants.

The rooms were cool in the summer but in the winter if you let the walls get cold they stayed that way. It was best to keep some heat in them. The sod house was built in 1907 by Alvin's Dad and his brother John. The outside walls were covered with some sort of cement which is what has preserved the house. The walls inside and out were so crooked that I used to tease Dad and Uncle John that they must have been drinking some home brew because no one that was sober could have made walls that bad.

All kidding aside, crooked as they are they have lasted over a 100 years so they did a good job.

In 1950 the REA was coming and it was a real challenge to

wire the sod rooms. They were able to chisel a tunnel down from the ceiling and insert the wiring. It was wonderful to have lights and appliances but best of all was having a bathroom. Alvin was born in this old house and we were happy there.

After 40 years we bought a house in town but we still lived most of the time at the farm. After Alvin had a stroke in 2000 we stayed in town but went out often and a friend farmed for us.

My brother farms the land now and Alvin is gone. I have to decide how much I need or want to do to keep the old house intact. It sits there, no longer sheltered by the big trees but the yellow roses still bloom on the north side of the house. They were there when I came there in 1946 and a long time before. My sister-in-law Amelia said she planted them.

The house I was born in is long gone due to time and the ravages of weather, but I remember it well.



**HOLZWARTH SOD HOUSE today. The sod is plastered over with cement, and additions have been made. However it is still lived in today.**

**Did you or a member of your family live then?**

The town of St. Francis has a rich history. Many people will read the stories from "Sod Houses and The Dirty Thirties" and have their own story to tell. During the early twentieth century, life was very different. The Great Depression and World War II dominated most American's and Kansan's minds. Life was hard. There was no television, although many homes had a radio they listened to in the evenings. Outhouses, party line phones, and countless other experiences unknown to many today defined life during that time.

We encourage anyone who remembers what life was like in the earlier years, especially any person that lived in a sod house, to contact The Herald so we can tell your story!

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