

## "Boyhood Recollections: A Narrative of Homestead Days in North Eastern Montana," by Otto Jorgensen

We of course had the all-important problem of getting a house and barn built before the rigors of winter caught us with our "walls down." [We had] no money to buy lumber with, so it was decided to build of sod. . . . Helga and Pa, with the help of Soren and Jens Nickoliasen, were the ones on whom the herculean task fell. Soren was the "sodcarpenter" who in turn had learned to build a sod house that would stand up, from Pete Hendriksen from Nebraska, where sod houses were quite common. . . .

First a strip of good tough prairie sod had to be turned over with a 14-inch breaking plow, about three to four inches deep. If the implement was working as it should, this left a ribbon of sod fourteen inches wide and three inches thick. These were cut up into 28-inch lengths, loaded onto a flat-bed wagon or stone-boat, and hauled to the building site. A tier is then laid the length and breadth of the house, inside measurements, and the succeeding tier laid in a transverse position to the preceding one, like bricks, until the desired height is reached. There is, of course, a little more to it when it comes to corners, windows and doors, but after the sod is hauled, the whole thing can be done with a square-nosed spade and a strong back . . .

The house we built was unique in many respects and for all I know, the only one like it ever built. It was 16 by 24 feet; a full-sized cellar, walls 7 feet high, a ceiling, above which rose a peaked roof of unusually high pitch. The sod gables rose clear to the peaks, no small task in itself to accomplish. The sod, for the last part of these, had to be thawed out by the fire and hoisted up with tackle before they were completed. There were no partitions, the lower floor was a good floor, of three inch quarter-sawed fir, with 1" by 10" joists, 16" apart. The upper

floor had 2" by 6" joists about 24" apart, with 6" grooved boards. The roof—get this—the roof had 1" by 4" rafters, 4 feet apart, with 1" by 4" strips nailed crosswise to them about the same distance apart, to which was tacked, running up and down, what was called "resaw" boards  $\frac{3}{8}$ " thick by 10" wide, second or third grade stuff. On this was tacked a layer of tarpaper and another layer of "resaw." That roof, believe it or not, took the worst wind, rain, hail and snowstorms Montana had to offer for four long years. . . .

A sod [school] house had been built the year before we came, a sort of Community meeting-house, Church and school house, about three miles as a crow would fly . . . west and south of our homestead. . . .

Here I met a different breed of barefoot, overall-clad boys, some of them with an accent in their speech. We had no tracable accent, due to the fact that our folks had insisted upon using the Danish language in our home. Dad always said to Ma: "Let's teach the kids the language we are master of; they'll soon enough learn the other, and learn it correctly." . . . In this primitive earth and board structure. . . part of the time was devoted to English and later, entirely so. . . .

[A year before] this schoolhouse was full of children, including the young and buxom Marie Hansen, the teacher. . . . Although it's doubtful [she] ever had any experience with prairie fires, she no doubt had heard them described by early settlers. She was alert at the first sign of smoke, borne by the high northwest wind. There was no firebreak around the building, . . . and as the threatening smoke-clouds increased, she and the older boys did what they could to cover any inflammable parts of the building. . . . with dirt. In the meantime . . . she herded all the

frightened children inside, closed the door and placed her trust in the sod walls, and her faith in God. . . . With express-train speed, [the fire] swept down upon and over them. It seems to me that this remarkable woman . . . rates with other heroines of the frontier who have earned fame, if not immortality in extraordinary moments of intestinal fortitude, during fires, floods, snowstorms and blizzards. . . .

Schooling, too, was more or less of a hardship—what I got of it, except the few years in Wisconsin, where we only had a mile and a half to walk. Even though this is not my life history, except for the early days in Montana, and what pertains to it, I can't resist a few comments on that institution of learning that we attended in Wisconsin. No doubt everyone has heard of the now, almost legendary, "Little Red Schoolhouse." Well, this was it—just as you see pictures of it—and it was old. There were old grey-haired men and women in that community whose fathers and grandfathers had learned the three "R's" in that same school house. The belfry, I recall, was pock-marked and battered from the attempts of passing generations at hitting the bell with rocks and stones of various sizes. The schoolhouse itself, measured about 20 or 24 feet, by 30 or 32 feet, and had a row of windows on each side. The only door, protected by a small lean-to shed, or entry, was to the north. This shed served as wardrobe, and clothes locker, consisting of a row of nails driven into the wall, and as storehouse for wood to feed the hog-shaped, hog-bellied stove in the back of the room. The two blackboards—just that—blackboards—some with cracks between them; and the teachers desk were on each side of the door. Also, the pull-rope for the bell, shelf in one corner for the water pail and dipper, and a large chart on a tripod, with big paper pages about four feet square, stood beside the teachers desk. This about sums up the equipment and furnishings except for three rows of desks, one

on each side, and one in the middle. And last but not least—the teachers' pointer!

The threshold, or doorstep was worn through. The six-inch floor boards at the door and branching out towards the two aisles, were worn down like cow-paths, but the big square-headed iron nails were not; consequently causing many toe-stubbings.

You have all read, one time or another, John Greenleaf Whittiers' poem (or was it James Whitcomb Riley?) "The Little Red School House."—its charcoal frescoes on its walls—the doors' worn sill, betraying—etc. Well, this was it, only it wasn't poetry. I don't recall any charcoal frescoes, but I do remember the paper-wads and spit-balls on the ceiling. Many times, while daydreaming and staring at the ceiling, I used to wonder why it was so rough and lumpy, until I noticed a spot where the plaster had come loose. It showed that layer after layer of what looked like cardboard, but was simply chewed up tablet paper, had been poised on the end of a ruler or stick and snapped with a "splat" against the ceiling. The yearly peltings were simply whitewashed over from one generation to the next. I don't suppose any of you younger people know much about that sort of thing! The present, "well-behaved" youngsters of this day and age would never resort to such rude antics—perish the thought!

There had been a time when there were as many as forty pupils going to that school at one time, but the year we left, there was one—my sister, Esther. She went one term, alone, and that was after a new and larger school had been built. Why I didn't go that summer is not clear to me; most likely, I had to help with the moving preparation.

Source: *Jorgen Jorgensen Family Papers, 1921–1938*. Small Collection 178. Montana Historical Society Research Center. Archives. Excerpted in *Not In Precious Metals Alone: A Manuscript History of Montana* (Helena, 1976): 171–72.