

## Mud Housing – Joseph Jean Fauchon

**Objective:** This essay will outline the purpose and uses of traditional mud houses among those Métis who lived a traditional lifestyle on the Prairies.

People have basic needs that need to be met in order to ensure survival. These needs include food, water and shelter. When the Métis and non-Aboriginal settlers came westward from Central Canada, Europe and the United States they needed to meet these needs in order to survive harsh and trying times. Settling near a body of water, usually a river system, provided water. Food came from farming, which was not always reliable, gathering and hunting, which was the choice favoured by the Métis. The last need to be met was shelter. There were many different forms of shelter on the Prairies, including tents, tipis and houses. A majority of the houses erected during this era, 1860-1920, were called mud houses.

The only time that most Métis stayed in a specific area for any lengthy period was during the winter when the large-scale buffalo hunts were not occurring. This brought about a need for a temporary house known as a *maison d'hiver* or winter house. During the rest of the year the Métis would be out freighting, trading, or on the buffalo hunt. Every winter they would return to these homes and conduct minor repairs when needed.

*The house that I had left there needed refixing. I had my family with me now. I mudded the house, and put all my goods in the storehouse under lock and key (Welsh, p.37).*

Often families would situate their homes around other families to form a little village. The people who lived in these little villages were known as *hivernants* or winterers.

*... I took a little ride around our village – log huts of the traders which were scattered over the plain ... There were about thirty or forty of these houses, all made of logs and plastered with clay. These huts were the winter homes of the traders (Welsh, p.21).*

Mud houses were constructed by using logs to form the frame of the house. Many logs were stacked up to form a common log house. Finding logs to use in the building of the house was easy because of the abundant stands of poplar and willow trees on the Plains. These logs then had to be cut and prepared so that they would fit securely and be durable.

*Construction was of locally available white poplar, black poplar, tamarack, or spruce logs, squared or hewn and secured at the corners using tight-fitting dovetail joints (Chandler, p.40).*

There were three ways of securing the logs to form the cabin. The first was saddle notching. This technique used smaller logs that had notches carved into their bottom so that they would fit over the logs below them. Non-permanent structures used this technique because saddle notching was not very strong; however, it was an easy and quick form of construction. These houses were not very big and were usually only one storey high.

The second approach was the Red River style, which used tendon and groove construction. A groove was cut into a vertical log and the ends of the horizontal logs were cut to fit into these grooves. This technique was a little bit stronger than saddle notching, however, there was one more technique employed by the Métis that was very sturdy and durable.

The third manner for securing logs was the dovetail joint. This method involved forming the end of the log into a triangular shape. These logs were then fit together to form a self-locking joint. This technique ensured that the

cabins would be stable for many years. Cabins erected using the dovetail joint were usually more than one storey high.

After the frame of the house was complete a roof would then be added to it. These roofs were usually constructed by laying poles across the frame of the house and then covering the poles with hay or sod. Occasionally, if the house was to be permanent lodging, then wooden shingles would be used.

These log houses were then mudded to form a wall to seal the cracks between the logs. The mud used to plaster the house came from material found on the land where the house was situated. The plaster consisted of dirt, water and straw or slough grass. Marcel LeBarg described this process during an interview, conducted by Maria Campbell, on June 23, 2003 at Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan.

*María: ... how do they make this?*

*Marcel: Straw and mud.*

*María: How much mud and how much water?*

*Marcel: Until you get plaster.*

*María: Oh so you just go by how it feels hey.*

*Marcel: It is a mud like plaster hey.*

*María: Straw or slough grass?*

*Marcel: Better if you use slough grass. But you know it is stronger than strong. Slough grass never breaks and you plaster with your hands or you can use the palm of your hand. And you see when it rained you see this holds. This has lasted twenty-five years (Campbell et al., 6.5).*

To make traditional mud for a house, a person would put dirt into a tub and add a little water. They would then chop up some straw and add it into the tub as well. It was then time for someone to step into the tub and mix the materials up with his or her feet until it formed a thick paste. Once the paste reached the desired thickness, the mud was thrown onto the logs.

These big mud clumps were then smoothed out by hand to form a mud wall covering over the logs. The mud provided a cheap and quick way to weatherproof a log home. "Mudding pits" were a very common sight. These pits were kept nearby so that the family would have a supply of mud to use in case repairs needed to be made to the home.

After the logs were cemented together with the mud or clay, bison hides were stretched out over the windows and doors to keep the weather out. Dirt piles were used to keep out the rain and mice. Marcel LeBarg and Cheryl Troupe discussed this technique during an interview, conducted by Maria Campbell, on June 23, 2003 at Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan.

**Cheryl:** *Do you know like Maria was saying they would pile dirt up on the bottom or they would make a kind of like a flower box at the bottom with dirt to keep the mice out and to keep the...*

**Marcel:** *Oh it was piled.*

**Cheryl:** *This one was banked up.*

**Marcel:** *They had the water going... ? ... or else it would seep in you had to keep your water going away at all times (Campbell et al., 19.7).*

These houses were not very well-insulated, so bales were stacked up along the outside of the house to aid in insulation. Packing snow up along the wall also helped to keep the house warm.

The chimneys and fireplaces that were used to heat the homes were constructed in the same fashion as the rest of the home, using branches, straw and mud. This might not seem very fire safe but this design was not only safe but it was also very durable and could handle even the hottest of fires.

*Like all other fire places and chimneys in Kildonan they were made by first putting up a framework of branches and then building them up out of dry clay and water and straw, kneaded into a paste. This dried hard and the*

*heat of the fire kept hardening it until it became as hard as bricks (Healy, p.72).*

Many of these fireplaces are the only remnants of the cabins left standing.

Often as the family began to grow or as people moved in there was a need for expansion. Often a larger kitchen was needed. After the kitchen was built, it could easily be added on to the house and then connected using the mudding technique.

*When the kitchen was finished, we lathed it with willows, and plastered it with mud mixed with water. When the walls were dry, we white washed them with lime.*

The entire house was often whitewashed when the mud on the walls was dry.

Making the lime for the whitewashing was a difficult and time-consuming task, which involved many families working together. This lime was:

*...a remarkable mortar, which they manufactured from limestone rocks picked up along the lakeshores and hauled home by stone boats. Lime making was a long and arduous task... Each family shared in the unslacked lime to be used in mortar for plastering and white-washing their buildings (Schilling, p.13).*

Once the house was whitewashed it was complete. The only other thing needed was to construct the floor.

The floor was often only the hard dirt ground on which the house was situated or a hard mud plaster. Maria Campbell recalled her father's home:

*The wintering housing, the wintering places probably would have had dirt floors because they weren't there that long. I know my dad had one like this and it had a dirt floor but the clay floor and in the corner they had a beehive fire place made out of willows and it was and they plastered the floor and the whole thing (Campbell et al., 21.5).*

A dirt or mud floor was also easier for house keeping. If something, such as tea, was spilled onto the floor a person only had to sweep it out of the house and there would be no stains or mess on the floor. There are some reports of wood flooring but this was uncommon for most mud houses.

*There is no evidence for anything other than the packed clay for flooring in the remainder of the cabin structures, despite the numerous historical references to wooden floors in Métis cabins at other sites such as Trail Creek, St. Albert, Cypress Hills and Batoche (Doll, p.51).*

Although these houses seem primitive and were quickly constructed they were a remarkable contribution to architecture. These houses were durable and provided excellent shelter to the families of the Prairie West. A testament to their durability is a house located in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

*(It is...) the oldest inhabited house in Winnipeg which one family has occupied continuously ... The outside of the house was coated with stucco last year; an examination of the squared and mortised oak timbers of which the walls are built was made at the time, and they were found to be perfectly sound. The house was built in 1865" (Healy, p.141).*

The Métis have provided Canada with many contributions, such as unique fiddle music, the flower beadwork motif and many others. And now they can add architectural advancements to that list.

### **Sources:**

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