

PLAINS EARTHLODGES

Ethnographic and Archaeological Perspectives

Edited by

Donna C. Roper

and

Elizabeth P. Pauls

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Foreword

W. Raymond Wood

It is curious indeed that a serious study of the Plains earthlodge has been so long in coming. The earthlodge has been known in some detail now for exactly two centuries, ever since the passage of Lewis and Clark along the upper Missouri River. It also has been nearly a century since Clark Wissler popularized the Plains culture area concept in his *The American Indian*. Wissler did not include the earthlodge among his diagnostics for the Plains culture area, stressing instead the horse nomads of the High Plains (Wissler 1917:206–209).

The culture area concept, in one form or another, still remains viable as a geographic entity, included as it is as an organizational principle in the Smithsonian's new *Handbook of North American Indians* (e.g., DeMallie 2001). Yet the Plains, like the American Southwest, supported a dual lifestyle, a duality that was based on hunting and gathering vs. hunting and gardening. Wissler's "typical" Plains Indians, the tipi-dwelling Plains nomads—the "true" Plains Indians—had the oldest lifeway, going back thousands of years. The Plains Villagers, or gardeners, were the most recent development, dating to the past thousand years. These were the earthlodge dwellers, whose lifeways have been so eclipsed by the romantic sheen acquired by the nomads. There have been innumerable ethnographies of the village tribes but, as this volume testifies, almost nothing has been written about life in, and the construction of, these earth-mantled homes.

There have been, of course, pioneer studies. Lewis Henry Morgan stopped at the abandoned Arikara earthlodge village adjoining Fort Clark, in present-day North Dakota, in June 1859 and recorded his observations of the ruined lodges there. These he compared with descriptions left us by George Catlin and Prince Maximilian (Morgan 1965:72–73, 133–139). Though his interpretations of those lodges are of little use to us today (e.g., "It is made reasonably plain . . . that they practiced communism in living in the household, and that this principle found expression in their house architecture and predetermined its character" [Morgan 1965:139]), his effort to understand Native American house life stood as a novelty for many decades.

In 1902, Washington Matthews published "The Earth Lodge in Art," in

which he complained of the “misrepresentations which art has made of the earthlodge,” which he proceeded to correct by photographs of standing examples of them (Matthews 1902:2). A constant feature, as he noted, was the “long passage, entry, or storm-door,—the Eskimo doorway, as Morgan designates it” (Matthews 1902:5). This commendable effort to dispel error, however, makes no effort at interpretation. The only real interpretive efforts are those that have been made by archaeologists who contemplated the architectural aspects of the prehistoric antecedents of the historic structures. This shortfall, we pray, may end with the stimulation provided by this volume.

The Mandans, Hidatsas, Arikaras, and Pawnees—the peoples I like to call the “Old Settlers” among the Plains villagers—were the standard-bearers of the “classic” historic earthlodge architecture. It seems certain that the Kansas, Missourias, Otoes, Omaha-Poncas, and Yanktonais and Santee Dakota (the Prairie villagers, as Kroeber [1947:84–85] called them) adopted the earthlodge architecture from them. The editors of the present volume show commendable restraint in speculation on the origins of the Plains earthlodge. Given the agricultural base of the Plains village folk, and other parallels with the Southeast, a derivation from that direction is not implausible, though I believe the form is most likely an independent invention based on southeastern wattle-and-daub prototypes in the Central Plains, a prototype that was perfected in the bitter winters of the Northern Plains. Here I do not depart in any significant way from either Ralph Linton’s (1924) speculations on the origin of the earthlodge or those of our present editors, revealing how little progress has been made in that quest in the past three-quarters of a century. But no satisfactory derivation can be inferred given the nearly continent-wide distribution of the earthlodge itself in the United States—if indeed the “earthlodges” of the Southeast are properly identified. A West Coast origin clearly is out of the question, and deriving them from the pithouses in the Southwest is marginally better but still implausible.

Let us hope the present volume stimulates further substantive research into the history and relevance of this architectural form in the study of the cultures and culture history of the Indians of the Great Plains. The introductory and concluding chapters by the editors tell us what we know today and where we should be heading in our research, and the remaining essays illuminate varying internal, social, and constructional aspects of this house type that we should be considering. Such collaborative research as this volume illustrates is not only necessary, it is mandatory. Let us continue the effort to better understand our subject.

Preface

The earthlodge is the largest and most complex artifact present in archaeological sites on the Great Plains of North America. Untold thousands of earthlodges (a term we construe somewhat broadly, as we discuss in Chapter 1) were built over a period of about a millennium and, in the past century, archaeologists have excavated hundreds of their remains. Yet despite the importance of the earthlodge, the framework for their interpretation is poorly developed. Archaeologists working with lodge remains seem to know too little about the considerations that went into their construction, how they became part of the archaeological record, what they symbolized, and how they were integrated into the social order. We have a wealth of manuals for the analysis of pottery, lithics, bone, floral remains, and so forth, but houses are features, and while techniques for their excavation may be discussed in field manuals, we have nothing even remotely comparable to these manuals to help with the analysis and interpretation of lodges.

Although each of us came to the study of earthlodges via a different path, we began talking with each other about them in the late 1990s and haven't ever stopped. Over the years, each of us has written a number of articles and given conference papers on topics concerned with earthlodges. We have also organized Plains Conference round-table luncheons dealing with them. In late summer 2002, we decided to go the next step and organize a symposium for the 2003 Society for American Archaeology meeting in Milwaukee. We put out a call for papers and, in addition to our own contributions, received five other commitments.

This volume has grown out of the symposium. We are pleased that all of the authors who participated in the symposium also were interested in contributing to the book and delivered written papers within a few months of the meeting. All papers were expanded from the 15-minute teasers presented at the conference, and most were revised in other ways too. To help bring together the diverse perspectives presented in Milwaukee, we have written introductory and concluding chapters specifically for this volume, based in part on some discussions we have had in person at conferences, on the telephone, and by e-mail. W. Raymond Wood was originally going to be a discussant for the symposium, but a scheduling conflict precluded his atten-

dance at the meeting. We have, therefore, prevailed on him to write a foreword to this volume and are grateful to him for agreeing to do so.

We do not believe this will be the standard manual on Plains earthlodges—certainly we do not intend it to be. We do believe, however, that the papers assembled here sample the range of topics that are being addressed and reflect the diversity of types of research to which earthlodge data can contribute. We hope the volume will stimulate further research into these structures and the manner in which they structured the lifeways of their occupants.

A book cannot be completed without the help of many people, and this one is true to that rule. Of course, all of its shortcomings remain our responsibility. We would like to thank Judith Knight and the University of Alabama Press for their interest in this volume and Kathy Cummins for her editorial skills. We also thank all the symposium participants/chapter authors for their contributions and for meeting deadlines with minimal prodding. Press reviewers Don Wyckoff and George Odell presented many helpful comments. We hope we have adequately addressed their concerns and know that their comments have made this a better book. W. Raymond Wood, in the course of preparing his foreword to this volume, also reviewed its content and saved several authors some embarrassment by providing a number of corrections of historical details. The Office of the State Archaeologist at the University of Iowa (UI-OSA) bore many of the expenses of copying, mailing, telephone calls, and reproduction fees and provided material assistance with manuscript production, a contribution that has been greatly appreciated. At UI-OSA, we are especially thankful for Linda Langenberg's assistance in the physical production of the manuscripts.

A Note on Plains Village Taxonomy and Chronology

The authors in this book make repeated reference to the culture-historic taxa defined for parts of the Plains. To avoid distracting digressions throughout and the even worse annoyance of leaving the nonspecialist in the dark, we provide here a brief guide to basic time-space systematics and chronology for the Plains during approximately the previous millennium—the period during which earthlodges were used.

Wedel (1961:23) and Lehmer (1971:28–29; see also Wood 1998:10–13) recognized five *subareas* within the Plains *area*. Earthlodges were found in three of these: the *Middle Missouri*, the *Northeastern Plains* (“Northeastern Periphery” in some of the older literature), and the *Central Plains*. The latter includes Nebraska and the Kansas River basin portion (roughly the north half) of Kansas, both to about 100° W longitude, plus adjacent northwest Missouri and southwest Iowa. The Middle Missouri subarea encompasses the Missouri River valley of the Dakotas. The southernmost part of this valley in South Dakota is sometimes considered a part of the Central Plains or a sort of transition between the Central Plains and Middle Missouri subareas (Lehmer 1971:28), but that fine point is of little consequence here. The Northeastern Plains subarea includes the Dakotas north and east of the Missouri River valley, plus extreme western Minnesota and northwest Iowa.

Lehmer’s (1954:139–154) definition of the Plains Village pattern and specifically of the three traditions subsumed within it remains fundamental to Plains cultural taxonomy. Phases or variants have been defined within each tradition and a basic chronology has been worked out. Both the phase taxonomy and the chronology are continually being refined, but the following general statement should give uninitiated readers what they need to make sense of the terms used in this book. For more details, the chapters in Wood (1998) and DeMallie (2001) and references cited therein may be consulted.

The three traditions of the Plains Village pattern are the *Central Plains tradition*, the *Middle Missouri tradition*, and the *Coalescent tradition*. The Central Plains and Middle Missouri traditions are largely contemporaneous; the Coalescent tradition follows them and was initially conceived as a blending, or coalescing, of traits of the two earlier traditions. Phases, or variants,

within the traditions are partially temporal and partially spatial. Some temporal overlap in spatially separate areas is noted.

CENTRAL PLAINS TRADITION (ca. A.D. 950–1400/1450)

Steed-Kisker phase	Northwest Missouri, northeast Kansas
Nebraska phase	Southwest Iowa (including the Glenwood locality), eastern Nebraska, extreme northeast Kansas
Smoky Hill phase	Central and north-central Kansas and possibly south-central Nebraska
Upper Republican phase	Northwest Kansas (including the Waconda Lake locality) and southwest Nebraska (including the Medicine Creek locality)
Itskari phase	Central and east-central Nebraska
St. Helena phase (early 1400s)	Northeast Nebraska

MIDDLE MISSOURI TRADITION

Initial variant (ca. A.D. 1000–1300)	
Eastern	Mill Creek (several subphases) in northwest Iowa, Cambria in southwest Minnesota
Western	Missouri and James River valleys in South Dakota
Extended variant (A.D. 1200–1400)	Dakotas
Terminal variant (A.D. 1400–1550)	South-central North Dakota

COALESCENT TRADITION

Initial variant (A.D. 1300–1600)	South-central South Dakota (sometimes considered part of Central Plains tradition)
Extended variant (A.D. 1400/1450–1650)	Dakotas
Post-Contact variant (A.D. 1675–1780)	Nebraska and Dakotas
Disorganized variant (A.D. 1780–1862)	Nebraska and Dakotas

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1 What, Where, and When Is an Earthlodge?

Donna C. Roper and Elizabeth P. Pauls

The earthlodge, as we discuss it in this volume, is a class of permanent, timber-frame, earth-covered dwelling (Figure 1.1) built by the agricultural village tribes of the Missouri River valley and its tributary valleys in the North American Great Plains. Plains earthlodges (also “earth lodges” or “earth-lodges” in the various sources) are prominent in the oral traditions, mythologies, and cosmologies of the people who lived in them; they are amply described and illustrated in nineteenth-century sources by explorers, traders, and travelers, as well as by later ethnologists; and they are well attested in the archaeological record of the Plains. Untold thousands of these structures were built over an area encompassing nearly eight degrees of latitude and about six or seven degrees of longitude and over a period of about a millennium (depending on what one actually admits to the earthlodge class, as we shall discuss), by around a dozen tribes of Northern Caddoan and Siouan affiliation. They were, truly, a major native North American house type.

In this volume, we explore various aspects of earthlodges as structures, as living space, as symbolic space, and as important features of the Plains archaeological record. Although space limitations and author self-selection prevent us from covering all aspects of earthlodges, we believe that the papers assembled here sample the diversity of topics and approaches that are necessary for an understanding of these dwellings and of the context in which they were used. To make it clear to our readers exactly what set of phenomena we are considering, we introduce the book by reviewing sources of information about earthlodges, their physical description and construction, and their distribution in space and time. The historic-period Plains earthlodge is a distinctive dwelling type, but it is not totally unique in North America, nor is it a late invention. We therefore also consider how these lodges compare and contrast with structures that also have been called earthlodges in other culture areas of North America, particularly the Southeast, and we compare and contrast the historic lodges of the Plains with their late prehistoric predecessors in the region.



Figure 1.1. A reconstructed Mandan earthlodge at On-a-Slant Village, North Dakota. Photograph by Donna C. Roper, October 1998.

THE HISTORIC PLAINS EARTHLodge

It is likely that European, particularly French, traders were in earthlodge villages as early as sometime in the seventeenth century, and it is a virtual certainty that men such as Bourgmont, who ascended the lower Missouri River in 1714 (Norall 1988), were in earthlodge villages in the early eighteenth century. However, the first European to specifically record observing an earthlodge and to attempt to describe one was Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, the *Sieur de La Vérendrye*. Entering a Mandan village in what is now central North Dakota in December 1738, La Vérendrye described the village, its fortifications, the people, and their dwellings, saying of the latter that they “are large and spacious, and are divided into apartments by broad planks. Nothing is left lying about, all their belongings being kept in large bags hung from the posts. Their beds are made like tombs, surrounded by hides” (Smith 1980:59)—a brief account and recognizable only if you know what he was describing. Six decades later, at the end of the eighteenth century, in 1798,

the British trader David Thompson was in five Mandan and Hidatsa villages, also in present-day central North Dakota. There, he recorded the number of houses and contrasted “houses” with “tents” (Wood 1977; Wood and Thiesen 1985:117–119), obviously recording the presence of earthlodges but not describing them.

In light of the brevity and vagueness of the La Vérendrye description and of Thompson’s stopping short of actually describing the “houses” he was counting, our first real recognizable descriptions of earthlodges are those in the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition. By early October 1804, the Corps of Discovery was in Arikara territory in present-day north-central South Dakota. On the tenth of that month, some members of the party went to one of the villages and several of the men, including John Ordway (Moulton 1983–2001:9:78–79), Joseph Whitehouse (Moulton 1983–2001:11:98), and Patrick Gass (Moulton 1983–2001:10:52–53), described the lodges in their journals. Ordway’s and Whitehouse’s descriptions are no longer and scarcely more recognizable than La Vérendrye’s. That by Gass, a carpenter by trade (Moulton 1983–2001:10:xiv), however, is 191 words long and gives dimensions, mode of construction, and overall plan, painting a verbal picture usable to an unfamiliar reader and justifiably frequently cited. Gass’s journal was published in 1807 and was soon accorded the dubious honor of being plagiarized by Charles LeRaye, whose purported account of an 1802 trip to the Arikara, complete with an earthlodge description that resembles Gass’s in many ways (Cutler 1971 [1812]:171–172), is now regarded as a forgery that drew on Gass’s journal (Wood 1990:86).

Over the next six decades, travelers and sometimes traders would record many more descriptions of earthlodges in the villages of a number of tribes of the Missouri River drainage (Table 1.1), and ethnologists would later add their descriptions (Table 1.2). Some would be shorter than Gass’s, others would be longer, with Clayton’s 1846 description of Pawnee lodges (Clayton 1973:97–100) and Morgan’s 1862 description of Arikara lodges,¹ complete with sketches (Morgan 1965:133–136), being perhaps the longest and most meticulous of them all. Additional information on various aspects of earthlodge construction, life, and meaning is found in various compilations of texts (also listed in Table 1.2).

The earliest drawing, sketch, or painting of an earthlodge we know of is Samuel Seymour’s 1819 drawing of a dance inside a Kansa lodge in the Blue

1. Morgan called them Mandan lodges, but this is the village at Fort Clark, where lodges the Mandan had built were burned in 1839. By this time, most Mandan had left and the Arikara had moved onto the location, and it was they who built the new lodges (Wood 1993). Morgan, therefore, was observing Arikara, not Mandan, lodges. (We thank W. Raymond Wood for pointing out Morgan’s error.)