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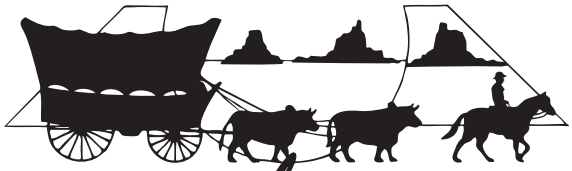

Everyday Life: THE FRONTIER

Walter A. Hazen

GOOD YEAR BOOKS

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Dedication

To Martha, Jordan, and Allison

Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank Roberta Dempsey, Editorial Director at Good Year, for giving me the opportunity to be a part of such an exciting project. Her support and confidence in me is likewise appreciated.

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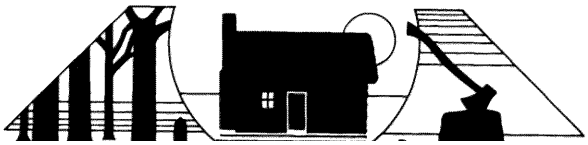

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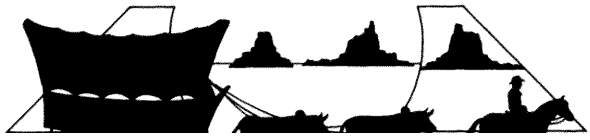


Introduction

The Frontier. The West. The Old West. The Wild West. The Far West. The Last Frontier. By whatever name it was called as it advanced to the Pacific Ocean, the story of the American frontier is one of excitement and adventure.

The word *frontier* can loosely be defined as where settlements end and the wilds begin. The first frontier in America extended from the Atlantic Ocean to the Appalachian Mountains. Until 1763, only a few hunters and trappers had ventured beyond this natural border. But, in time, some of the 3,000,000 English colonists who lived along the Atlantic Seaboard began to grow restless. Natural curiosity and the desire for more fertile lands caused the adventuresome among them to look west for a better way of life.

In 1763, following the French and Indian War, Great Britain gained control of French lands between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. King George III immediately declared the area off-limits to settlement, preferring not to stir up the Indians who lived there. But some colonists ignored his command and, about the year 1770, began making their way into the wilderness. Five years later, Daniel Boone and a company of men blazed the Wilderness Road through a gap in the mountains and opened the gateway to the West. In a short time, settlers began to pour through the Appalachians into the Mississippi and Ohio valleys. They established the second American frontier, which centered around what are now the states of Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, and Illinois. Other pioneers made their way into the upper Great Lakes and Gulf of Mexico regions.

By the 1830s, most of the land east of the Mississippi River had been settled. Pioneers then pushed across the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains to Utah, California, and Oregon. In May 1841, the first of many pioneer wagon trains left Missouri and headed across the continent to the Pacific. Nearly all passed through the dry and treeless plains, which at the time were considered unfit for settlement.

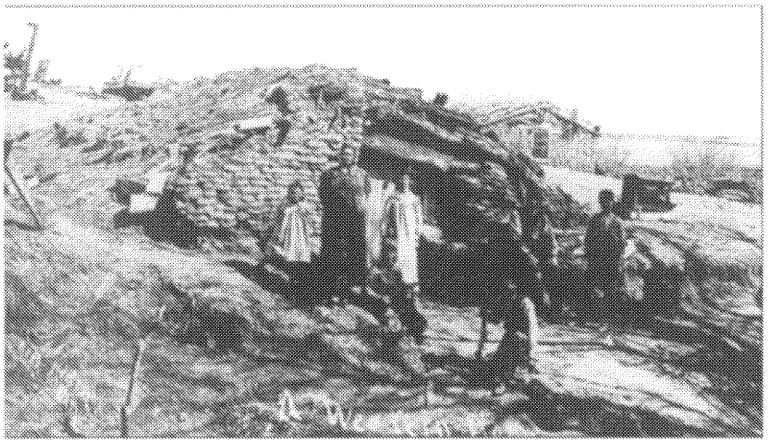
The final frontier in America began after the Civil War with the settlement of the Great Plains. For a period of about thirty years, farmers, ranchers, and miners flocked to the area. Many of these pioneers were immigrants from Europe. The frontier is said to have ended in 1890 with the final subjugation (conquest) of the American Indians and the fencing-in of the open range.

Walter A. Hazen

CHAPTER 2

Frontier Homes

The first order of business for pioneers after reaching their destination was devising some kind of temporary shelter until a permanent home could be built. In the Southwest, where temperatures were milder, pioneers simply lived out of their wagons while building their homes. In colder climates, something a little warmer was needed. Temporary shelters included such structures as Indian-type wigwams, lean-tos or half-faced camps, and dugouts. What one built depended on the weather and the materials at hand.



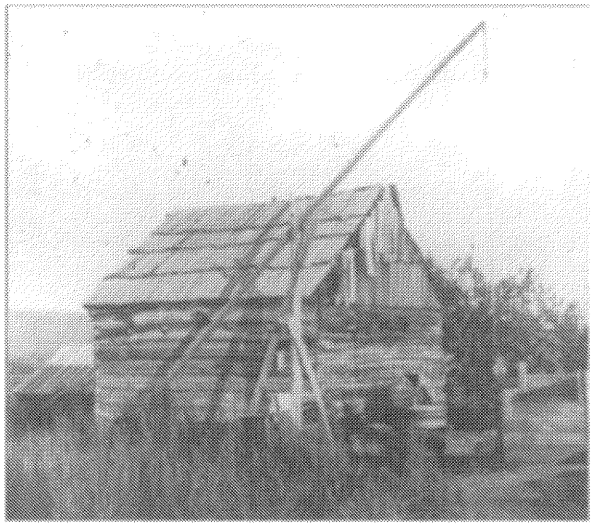
A family stands in front of their sod dugout home in Kansas. Such dugouts were usually temporary until a more permanent "soddy" could be built.

Pioneers who settled in wooded areas almost always built a lean-to as their first "home." A lean-to was a simple shelter left open on one side. It was easy to build and could be put up rather quickly. First, a crosspole was placed between two small, forked trees spaced the desired distance apart. Then a heavy log was banked with dirt to form a low back wall. From this log to the crosspole, the pioneer laid poles, forming a slanted roof that was covered with bark and branches. The sides of the lean-to were filled in with short poles stuck into the ground. The lean-to always faced south to offer a measure of protection from wind and rain. A fire was kept going constantly before the open side for warmth and to keep wild animals at bay. Some lean-tos, or half-faced, camps were little more than wigwams open on one side, while others were sturdy structures made of logs. Pioneers lived in these rough shelters while they put in their first crop and began work on a log cabin.

Those pioneers who settled on the treeless plains dug shelters into the sides of hills. Such dugouts served as homes until more comfortable sod houses could be built. A dugout was dark and cramped, and impossible to keep clean. But it had an even more unattractive feature. Since it was carved out of a hillside and thus had a natural sod roof, there was always the danger of a grazing cow crashing through at any time. (Bet you never had one of those drop in for dinner!)

Pioneers in forested areas built log cabins modeled after those of earlier Swedish and German immigrants. A typical cabin might take weeks to prepare but could be put up in one day if other settlers who could help lived nearby. Neighbors often gathered for a "cabin raising," which combined cooperative work with a chance to socialize and have fun. But a lone pioneer, if necessary, could build a cabin by himself using only an ax. It just took him a little longer.

After a sufficient number of tall, straight trees were located and cut down, pioneers rolled or dragged them to the chosen cabin site. There they were cut into lengths of 12 to 18 feet. The logs had to be about the same size in circumference so that the cracks between them could be easily filled. Logs were notched at both ends to ensure that they fit snugly together.



An early ranch house in Eastern Oregon.

Before the walls were raised, four logs were laid to form a foundation. Most early cabins did not have floors, but those that did had floors made of puncheons. Puncheons were logs split and laid with the flat side up. Every effort was made to smooth the logs to reduce the risk of splinters.

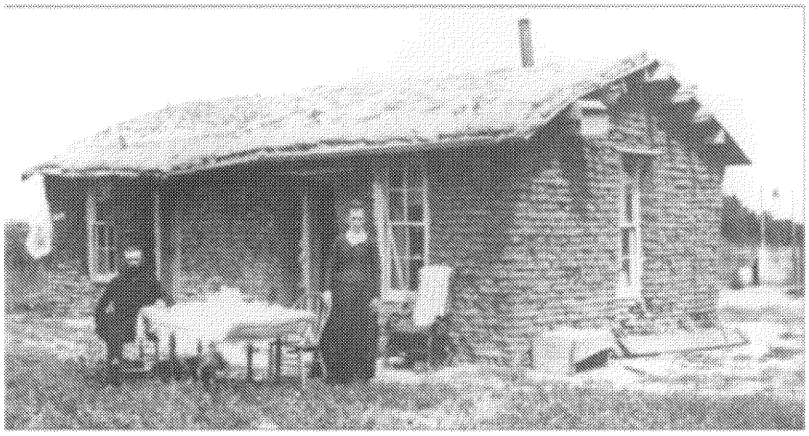
As the walls of the cabins went up, openings were cut for windows, a door, and a fireplace. Since glass was not available on the frontier, windows were covered with animal skins or oiled paper. At first the door of a cabin might be an old quilt or hide. Later, a permanent door was made of planks and held in place by leather hinges. A simple lock was made by attaching a string to the latch. The string hung outside the door through a hole. When the string was pulled, it lifted the latch inside and the door could be opened. At night, the string was pulled inside to securely "lock" the door.

Early fireplaces had what were called chimneys. They were made of stacked logs and insulated with "cats," blocks made from mixing mud or clay with grass or pine needles. Cats reduced the danger of fire somewhat, but log chimneys were always a fire threat and could easily burst into flames. As soon as possible, a pioneer family tried to replace their log chimney and fireplace with one made of stone.

Once the walls were completed, the cracks between the logs were chinked, or filled, with mud or clay to keep out the cold winds. Sometimes the mud and clay were mixed with moss, sticks, or small stones to make the

chinking material more solid. Then a roof was added of overlapping shingles, called shakes, cut with an ax and laid across poles. Since early pioneers had no nails, the shakes were held in place by weight poles and wooden pins.

Early frontier cabins contained little furniture. There might be a table, a few benches, and maybe a cradle. Tables and benches were made from puncheons, and sometimes a bed was built into one cabin wall. Many pioneers never bothered to build a bed at all. They simply wrapped up in an animal skin or blanket and slept on the floor. The more industrious constructed a loft that could be reached by a ladder.



A man and his wife pose outside their sod house in Kansas. It was a common practice for pioneers to have their pictures taken with all or some of their worldly possessions displayed outside.

The typical house on the prairie was the sod house. Settlers called it the "soddy," and it satisfied the need for housing on the treeless plains. A sod house was made entirely of large blocks cut from sod, which is grass with its roots and dirt attached. Even the roof was made of sod laid across poles cut from the little wood that was available.

To build their house, a prairie family cut large, rectangular blocks of sod about six inches thick. It usually took an acre of sod to build a one-room house measuring 16' × 20'. Each block weighed about fifty pounds and was carried to the building site in a wagon. To form the walls, the blocks were stacked like bricks with the grass side down. Any gaps were filled in with dirt or mud. As with the log cabin, openings were left for windows and doors. Homesteaders who could afford them ordered real windows and doors through mail-order catalogs. Most people, however, fashioned these enclosures out of box crates they had brought along on their journey to the frontier.

Sod houses had very definite advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, they were cozy and warm in the winter and cool as a cave during the summer. They were fireproof, windproof, flaming-arrowproof, and, for the most part, bulletproof. Houses of sod that took about a week to build might last ten years. They could withstand tornadoes and prairie fires, and some are still standing today. Even after lumber became available to homesteaders, many loved their soddies so much that they stayed in them.

The disadvantages of sod houses were numerous. They were damp and musty, and they leaked when it rained. Children were kept busy protecting bedding from getting wet during rainstorms, as they scurried about with pails trying to catch all the water dripping from the ceiling. Entire meals would be ruined when muddy dirt fell into what was cooking on the stove. Sometimes soup or stew cooked while one of the children held an umbrella over the pot!

Another drawback of soddies was that more than just rainwater sometimes fell from the roof. At any moment, an insect, a rat, or a snake could drop in unannounced. These and other unwelcome guests also managed to tunnel their way through the walls of the house. Some pioneers partially solved this problem by tacking cheesecloth to the rafters of the roof to help catch whatever might tumble down.

Settlers with means often furnished their sod houses with the best the East could offer. Do you think there was room left for the family in this soddy?

In spite of the hardships, homesteaders made sod houses as comfortable as possible. They plastered the walls with a mixture of lime and sand and decorated them with brightly colored gingham cloth. In time, many pioneers covered their hard dirt floors with carpets or animal skins. Some even planted flower seeds on the roof of their soddies to make them more appealing. When these flowers bloomed, along with the prairie roses and morning glories that might spring up on their own, the soddies must have presented a colorful sight to a passer-by.

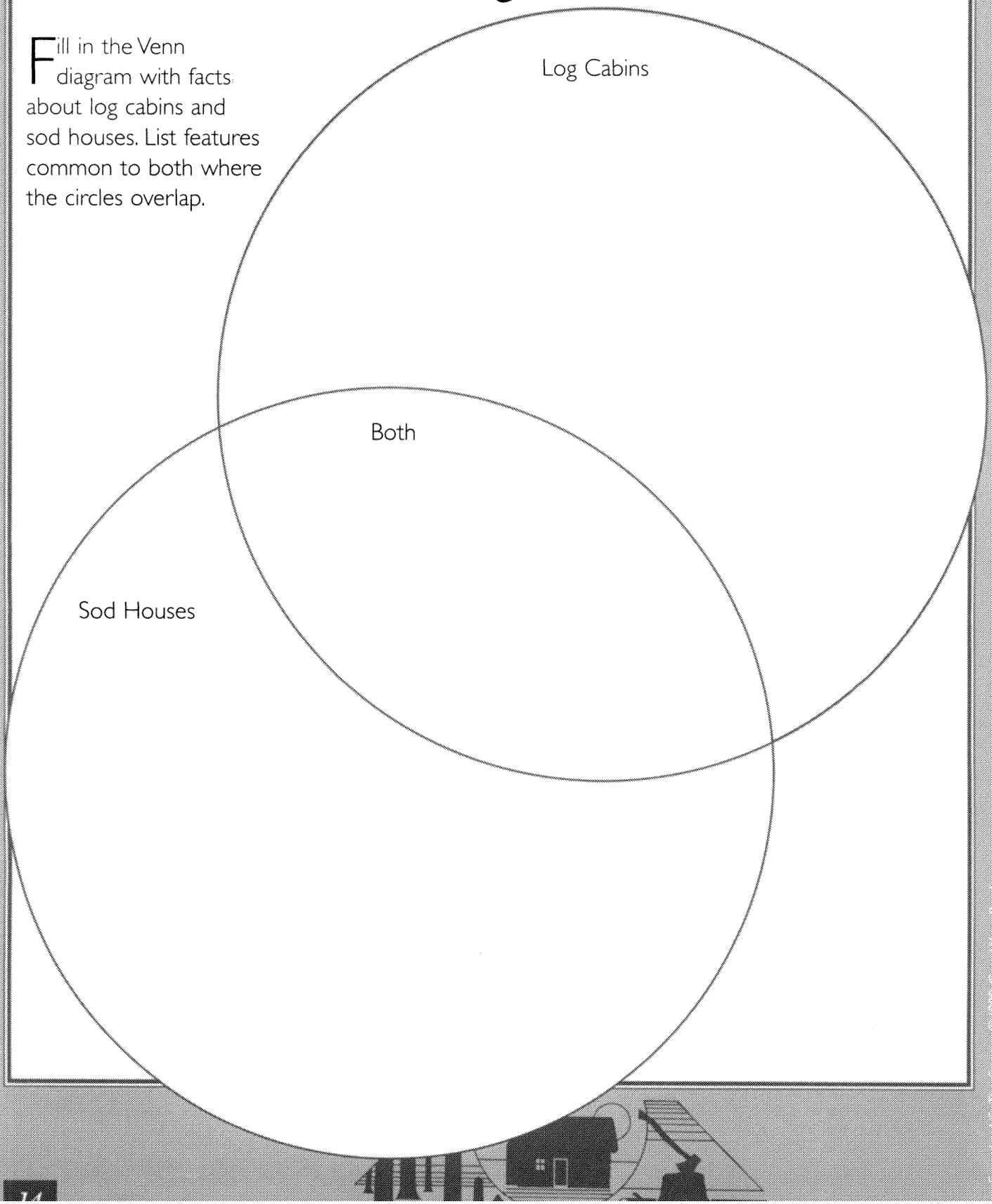
Many sod houses were sparsely furnished, especially those of hunters, trappers, and newly arrived farmers. There might be a table, a few chairs or benches, and several rough beds. But pictures have survived that show some sod homes furnished with lace curtains, ornate dressers and sideboards, fancy beds, organs, and framed pictures. It all depended on one's means.

As time passed, lumber, brick, and stone became more available on the frontier. This was true even when the boundary stopped at the Mississippi River. By 1810, some pioneers east of the Mississippi had abandoned their log cabins for more elaborate homes. Settlers on the Great Plains did the same with their soddies. But for many years, the log cabin and the soddy were symbolic of life on the American frontier. Without these first, inexpensive homes, settlers could not have withstood the hardships of pioneer life.

Name _____ Date _____

Fill in a Venn Diagram

Fill in the Venn diagram with facts about log cabins and sod houses. List features common to both where the circles overlap.



Name _____ *Date* _____

Make a Shoebox Diorama

Make a shoebox diorama of a scene centered around a log cabin or a sod house. Your diorama might depict one of the following:

1. Men and boys felling trees to build a cabin
2. A family carrying blocks of sod in a wagon to their half-built sod house
3. Men and boys stacking logs to make a cabin wall
4. A plains family sitting in front of their sod house
5. A family eating at a rough table made of puncheons

Or, you may want to think of another scene to create. If you are especially talented and energetic, you might want to make a model of a log cabin or a sod house.

Some materials that will be helpful in preparing your diorama are

1. a large shoebox
2. modeling clay or small figurines
3. construction paper
4. cardboard
5. magic markers or watercolors and paintbrush
6. scissors
7. glue
8. sticks cut into miniature logs

On the lines below, write a brief description of what is being depicted in your diorama.

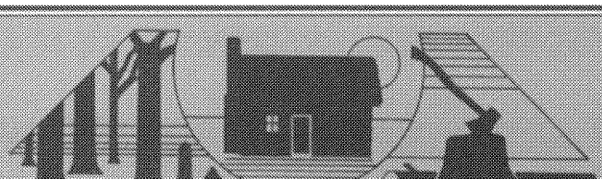
_____

_____

_____

_____

_____



Name _____ Date _____

Write a Letter About a Sod House

Imagine that you have recently arrived on the prairie with your parents and your four younger brothers and sisters. After a long, difficult journey from Ohio and several more weeks devoted to building a sod house, you and your family are at last ready to settle down. On your very first night in the one-room soddy, a heavy rainstorm sweeps across the prairie.

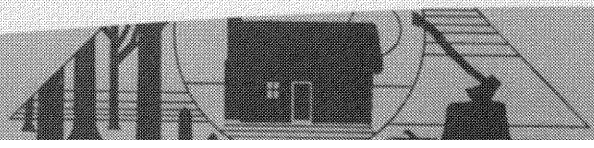
On the lines, write a letter to a former schoolmate in Ohio relating your impressions of the frontier and your thoughts about living in a house made of sod.

Date _____

Dear _____,

Your friend,

_____



Name _____ *Date* _____

Use Context Clues to Complete Sentences

Fill in the sentences with the verbs from the word box.

built	lacked
hauled	required
notched	enjoyed
called	laid
intended	satisfied
persevered	felled
cut	left
	stacked
	fit
	lived
	tamed

At first, people on the frontier _____ in lean-tos and dugouts. But these were temporary shelters, not _____ to be permanent.

Where there were forests, pioneers _____ log cabins. They _____ trees and _____ them the desired length. They _____ the ends of the logs so they would _____ firmly together. As they raised the walls, they _____ openings for windows and a door. Sometimes they _____ a floor of split logs _____ puncheons.

On the prairie, pioneers had to be _____ with houses made of sod. A sod house _____ about an acre of sod blocks. These blocks were cut and _____ to the building site in a wagon. There they were _____ in the manner of bricks to complete the house.

Both log cabins and sod houses _____ modern conveniences. They had no kitchens, running water, or bathrooms. But in spite of such handicaps, pioneers _____ and _____ the American wilderness.

Do you think you would have _____ living in a log cabin or a sod house?