

The Sod Shack by Hazel A. Parkinson

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In the autumn of 1881 there was only one dwelling, a sod shack about sixteen feet long and twelve feet wide, on the rolling prairie land of what is now the Hartney district in southwestern Manitoba. It was built the previous summer by Samuel F. Long and J. M. Fee on the section they chose as their homesteads.

In October of that year William Roper from Lancashire, England, with his sons Benjamin and James and his son-in-law William Cross, arrived at this shack. They had secured homestead land near Fee and Long but, because of the lateness of the season, they found the sod too badly frozen to be used in building a sod house. They arranged to live in the Fee-Long shanty for the winter while John Fee went to Brandon to work as a carpenter and Sam Long went to Winnipeg to draw freight, in order to earn money to buy a second yoke of oxen and other equipment for their homesteads.

That winter, in the sod shanty, the Roper party lived on provisions they had brought with them, hunting rabbits and exploring the ravines and the woods along the nearby Souris river, until the snow became too deep for their wanderings.

In March Sam Long returned to the shanty on his way to the Deloraine Land Office, twelve miles to the south, to register his homestead there. The day on which Long left the shanty to walk to the Land Office was threatening, but Long feared to delay his journey in case another incoming settler might register for possession of his homestead. He covered several miles before a blizzard overtook him and forced him to retrace his steps. The snow drifts were growing higher, but he struggled through them and reached the shanty in a state of exhaustion with his feet badly frozen. The Roper family received him and cared for his frozen feet, but Long was unable to walk for several weeks.

John Fee heard of Long's misadventure from a settler who passed the shanty on his way from Deloraine to Brandon, and he determined to go at once to his friend. When he set out from Brandon, he travelled with William Callander, Callander's two sons David and Robert and his son-in-law W. J. Higgins who had two ox-teams, a load of lumber and settlers effects. This party was also overtaken by one of the many blizzards that swept the prairie in the spring of '82, and had to take refuge in the home of a settler at Plum Creek.

Both travellers and oxen were exhausted when they finally reached the shanty at Hartney, but they were cared for by the Roper party and put to bed although they were all badly crowded in the small space.

Before the drifts melted another party of seven arrived and were made welcome in the shack, because there was nowhere else for them to go. Seventeen men in a sod shanty, sixteen by twelve feet, meant discomfort for all but the inmates made light of it and called the shack "The Orphans' Home." Each man had his own food and blankets, but space to cook the food or lay the blankets was indeed hard to find and the coming of spring was truly welcome.

The melting of the snow flooded the ravine that separated Callander's and Higgins' chosen homesteads from the shanty, and the lumber from Mr. Higgins supply was used to build a raft to take them and their gear to their location.

The warm spring days lowered the water in the ravines and dried the land. The Roper and Callander parties moved to their own homesteads, built small houses, ploughed a few acres and made the beginnings of prosperous farm homes.

Fee and Long were left in possession of their shack, the Orphans' Home, that played a humble but significant part in the beginning of the Hartney district.

