



J. Lehr

Mennonite village of Neuhorst, Manitoba. Note the linear configuration of this typical Mennonite *strassendorf*.

FOLK ARCHITECTURE IN MANITOBA: MENNONITES AND UKRAINIANS

by John C. Lehr

No province in Canada can match the variety of folk architecture found in Manitoba. The early agricultural settlement of the province was marked by the diversity of peoples lured into the area by the promise of free homestead lands, freedom of conscience, and economic betterment. Groups from Europe, among them Mennonites, Icelanders, Poles, Belgians, French, and Ukrainians, mingled with the Ontario British and Americans, in their search for lands beyond the river lot settlements of the Metis and Selkirk settlers, strung along the Assiniboine and Red.

Virtually every ethnic group transferred elements of their material culture to the new land. Styles of dress, household decorations and utensils, farm implements and, often, religious and secular architecture were implanted in Manitoba virtually without alteration, and although the pressures of assimilation and acculturation did much to accelerate the demise of distinctive ethnic material elements, even today the landscapes of ethnic settlement in Manitoba are still far more than faint echoes of the distinctive landscapes created in the pioneer era.

Of all the facets of material culture transferred into Manitoba that of domestic architecture was undoubtedly the most widespread and, with the possible exception of religious architecture, the most prominent in the landscape. The extent to which traditional architectural forms were transplanted into Manitoba by each group depended upon their social cohesion, pattern of settlement, susceptibility to acculturation, rate of economic progress, and the degree to which the new physical environment differed from that of their homeland.

It is not the intention here to engage in a detailed examination of the architectural forms of all the ethnic groups which settled in Manitoba, but to present a brief overview of the domestic architecture and landscapes of two of the groups most significant in both visual and numerical terms: the Mennonites and the Ukrainians. The two groups form an interesting contrast in terms of their architecture and their pattern of settlement since although both emigrated from the Ukraine in the closing decades of the nineteenth century they were heirs to radically different cultural traditions. When settling in Manitoba they created completely different landscapes, both of which have endured, in some measure at least, until the present day.

The Mennonite Landscape

Some forty miles south of Winnipeg, lying on either side of the Red River, are two massive tracts of land which were set aside by the Federal Government in 1874-5 for the exclusive settlement of Mennonite immigrants. Thousands of these German speaking anabaptists from the steppe-lands of the southern Ukraine immigrated to these reserves from 1874 until 1877. The Mennonites were a people with a long history of migra-

tion and colonization, always searching for freedom of conscience and refuge from the persecutions which befell all those who dared to defy the authority of secular rulers and their established churches.¹

In the 1870s, Canada, desperate to attract good agricultural settlers into the virgin lands of the newly acquired West, offered special conditions to induce the Mennonites to settle in Manitoba. Apart from a guarantee of religious freedom and the reservation of lands for their exclusive settlement, they were offered exemption from certain requirements of the Dominion Lands Act which enable them to maintain the system of village agriculture which was the basis of their society in Ukraine.

In both the East and West Reserves Mennonite settlements took the form of the *strassendorf*, or street village, where farm houses were strung out along a single street, in a direct replication of their former settlements in Prussia and the southern Ukraine.²

In Mennonite villages in Europe land was held in common and farmed using the age-old co-operative strip system of open field agriculture. In the early years of their settlement in Canada the Mennonites attempted to replicate this system and often initially succeeded in so doing. Nevertheless, the system was generally short-lived in Canada, since the Federal Government insisted that homestead land was granted to individual farmers, and not be given to the group to be held in common, so that the co-operative system fell apart when dissident or progressive Mennonite farmers decided to abandon the traditional communal way and withdraw from the village system to farm their own particular quartersection. Ninety villages or more were established by the Mennonites but most fell prey to such fragmentary forces and disbanded and disappeared. Only seventeen now remain, all of them in the West Reserve south and west of Altona.³

In these surviving villages, notably Gnadenthal, Reinland, Chortitz, Hochfeld, and Blumenort, one may still see both the distinctive settlement pattern and the domestic architecture of the Mennonite people. Apart from the *strassendorf* village the most distinctive element of the Mennonite landscape is the house-barn combination, where the house is joined to the barn, usually sharing the same roof axis. This form, which had its antecedents in the lowlands of the Netherlands, was taken by the Mennonites to the marshlands of Prussia, the *steppelands* of Ukraine, and finally, to the Canadian prairie.

These house-barn structures built by the Mennonites in the early years of settlement were mostly of log, though after the turn of the century wood frame construction made its appearance. Changes in appearance were wrought by the replacement of thatch with wood shingles, which triggered a lowering of roof pitch but which otherwise had little real impact.⁴

Mennonite houses displayed a uniformity in the arrangement of social space within the house. Usually the house was divided into two equal parts. In the front half were one or two bedrooms and the *Groote Shtov*, a large room doubling as living room and parent's bedroom. In the back part of the house which backed on to the barn, was the main kitchen-dining area, a cooking room opening on to it; a large utility room; pantry, stairs leading to the attic and *Rajka Koma* (smoke closet in the chimney); and the *gang*, the passage leading to the barn.⁵

Like the house, the adjoining barn was generally modelled after the pattern adopted in Prussia and Ukraine. The barn was generally larger

Manitoba Archives; Andrew Mihaychuk Collection



Ukrainian pioneer building, J. Mikaychuk house and granary, Vita, Manitoba, 1915.



Ukrainian folk house, near Arbakka, Manitoba. Note the use of vertical tembering in the construction of both the house and the attached lean-to (*shanda*).



Abandoned Ukrainian farmhouse showing Red-River Frame construction and exterior mud plaster. Near Vita, Manitoba.



Refurbished Ukrainian pioneer house. Originally built in the 1920s this log house now has its exterior clad in modern siding. Positions of chimney, windows, and door, and the part extension on the gable end reveal its ethnic origin. Vita, Manitoba.

than the house, the base projecting about half a metre beyond the house base on either side, and had its roof ridge about a metre higher than that of the house, although it shared the same pitch as the house.

As acculturation eroded Mennonite traditions and economic pressures saw the fragmentation of the villages, the house-barn unit underwent a rather radical modification when the house was re-oriented to face the village street, making the connection with the barn via an enclosed passage, so creating a T-shaped plan. Later, this modification was extended when the traditional house form was abandoned in favour of an Anglo-Canadian style house, yet the connection to the barn was still retained.

Since the 1950s little new traditional style building has occurred in Mennonite villages. The only exception has been the construction of some Mennonite churches clearly modelled after the plan of the traditional house-barn combination incorporating the break in roofline and change in building width which was traditionally found between the house and barn, without there being, of course, any need to differentiate interior space in the church building.

THE UKRAINIAN LANDSCAPE

Some twenty years after the immigration of Mennonites into Manitoba, in 1896, Ukrainian peasants from the Austrian administered provinces of Halychyna (Galicia) and Bukovyna established their first settlements in Manitoba. By the turn of the century Ukrainians had established the nuclei of several settlements, all in the bush country of the prairie aspenparkland and the transition zone between the parkland and boreal forest.⁶

Unlike the Mennonites, Ukrainian settlers entered Canada without being accorded any special privileges in settlement. They had come from an area where village settlement was the norm, but in Canada they were obliged to settle on individual homesteads and were thus unable to replicate their villages in the New World. Nevertheless they tended to settle as close together as possible and it was not uncommon to find immigrants from one specific village occupying homesteads in a small specific area, and creating something of their former local society in the new environment.⁷

Since they originated from two provinces with a diversity of folk culture the Ukrainians brought many different varieties of traditional architecture with them. Indeed, it is almost impossible to offer a brief generic description of the Ukrainian folk house, except to note that they all shared the common characteristics of a southward orientation, and had a central chimney in a single storey, rectangular plan building, with a hip, hipped gable or gable roof. Most were of log construction and the great majority, though by no means all, were sheathed in limewashed mud plaster.

The type of log construction used by Ukrainian pioneers in Manitoba varied considerably.⁸ Horizontal logs corner-joined by saddle notchings was most widely employed but in areas where good building timber was difficult to obtain, post and fill, known locally as Red River Frame or Hudson's Bay frame, was often used. In some of the more marshy areas where any kind of mature timber was absent the Ukrainians used stockade walling with vertical timbers, but this method was used only infrequently. The Ukrainian immigrants were familiar with all three of these construction methods from their homeland and despite some speculation to the contrary did not acquire knowledge of Red River Frame from Metis settlers living along the banks of the Red River.⁹

In early years Ukrainian pioneers built using local materials; roofs were thatched from slough grass and hence were steeply pitched to ensure rapid shedding of rainfall. As with the Mennonite buildings replacement of thatch with split shingles led to a reduction of roof pitch and hence house profile. Apart from this, and some other minor modifications, the form of the Ukrainian folk house changed little for many years after settlement. In part this was a reflection of the remote locations of many Ukrainian settlements which afforded some protection from the onrush of Anglo-Canadian influences. Economic progress in many settlements was slow, a factor which further reduced the propensity for modernization and change. Established patterns of spatial organization within the house also tended to militate against any radical modification in the basic plan of the Ukrainian folk house.

Although four room arrangements have been identified in Ukrainian folk houses in Canada, three of these were essentially variations upon a fundamental two-room theme. The western room called the **mala khata** (little house) was the centre of daily activity where cooking, eating, washing, and even sleeping took place. Here was situated the large stove (**pich** or **pietz**) whose massive size enabled it to radiate heat for hours after its fire was dead, and whose flat top provided a sleeping place for the children in the cold winter months. The eastern room, the **velyka khata** (big house) although sometimes slightly larger, was used less intensively, for it tended to be the focus of ceremonial occasions and formal activities, or be used as the sleeping area of the parents of a large

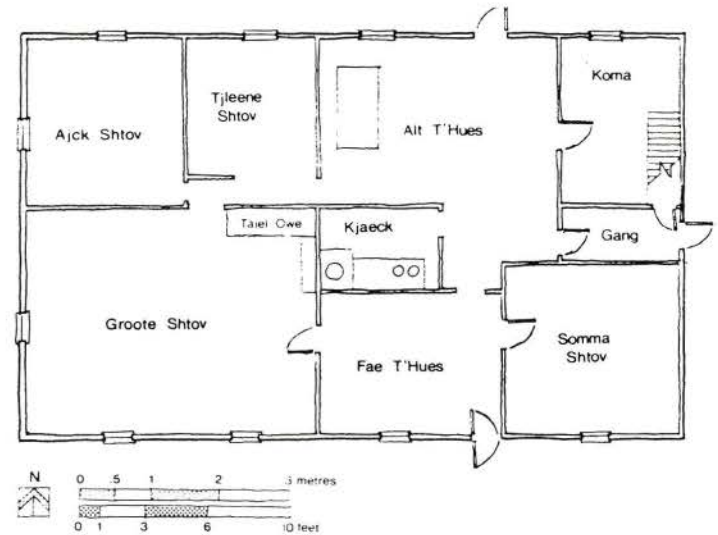
family. This general pattern of room use did much to ensure that the plan and, to a degree, the elevation of the Ukrainian pioneer dwelling remained constant through both time and between geographic areas in Canada.

Even today these Ukrainian houses may be recognized across the three Prairie Provinces. In Manitoba most are now abandoned and in sad disrepair but a few still remain as principal dwellings on small farms in the more isolated or poorer areas. For those still occupied the original mud plaster has generally been replaced with modern siding but the arrangement of doors and windows, wall ratios, and chimney placement, all conspire to reveal the folk origins of the building.

Variation in the details of house design may serve to indicate the regional origin of the builder. In a very general sense the occurrence of a heavy overhanging hipped or hipped gable roof on a home with a three-room configuration serves to indicate that the builder originated from Bukovyna. In contrast, the houses built by settlers from Halychyna were generally smaller, more plain, and possessed less of an overhang on the roof. Among the Halychyni the two-room configuration was more frequent, as was the use of the gable roof. In a very general fashion the distribution of the styles of building employed by settlers of Ukrainian origin offers a lasting record of the old country provincial origins of the settlers in each district.

Although this overview is concerned specifically with folk architecture, mention must be made of the role of the Ukrainian church in the pioneer and present landscape, for many early churches were merely extensions of the basic house form with crude replications of the Byzantine dome added in order to convey the religious nature of the structure. Such buildings can be designated as truly of the folk genre, but the later, more elaborate buildings, even though built by local craftsmen were generally patterned after homeland churches and thus incorporated many elements of high-style architecture even if they were not architect designed. The Ukrainian Catholic church at Cook's Creek, for example, was built by local parishioners, and designed by the parish priest, the Reverend Philip Ruh, who although not a professionally trained architect, was sufficiently familiar with high style church design in the Ukraine to embody these elements within his building.¹⁰ The result was a church in which folk elements are subdued and high-style elements predominate, yet which Hunter designates as folk architecture in that while it was impressive it was far from sophisticated, and had an elegant balance of imitation and variation which is most often encountered in folk architecture.¹¹

Nevertheless, the Ukrainian church in the countryside of Manitoba constitutes a highly visible element of Ukrainian culture in the landscape, one deserving of study in its own right, and one, moreover, which promises to outlast the widely scattered but more ephemeral folk houses.



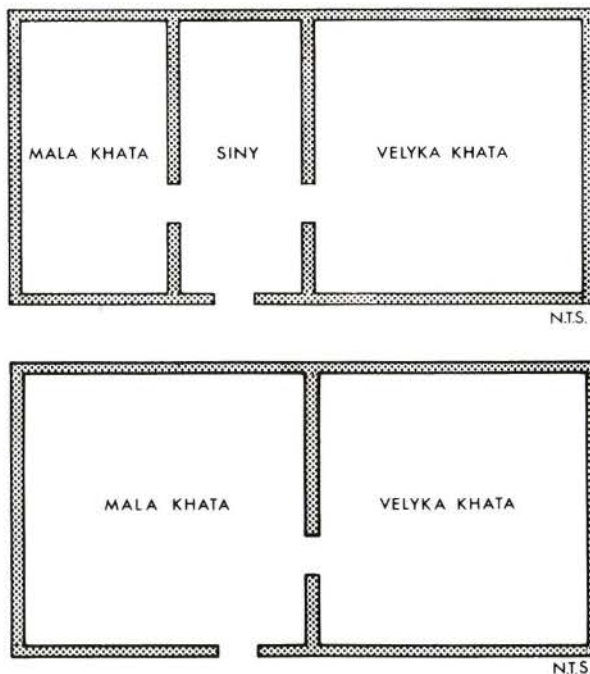
Floor plan of typical Mennonite house. The plan is taken from Butterfield and Ledehowski, *Architectural Heritage*, 1984.

EPILOGUE

In Manitoba, as elsewhere in the West, both the Mennonite and Ukrainian traditions are under the seige of acculturative pressures. Rural out-migration is depopulating the countryside, farm consolidation is hastening the abandonment of small farmsteads, and visions of economic progress hasten the destruction of the old familiar and largely unappreciated, folk buildings. In the 1980s it is still possible to examine the folk traditions of Europe as manifested in Manitoba by pioneer builders, but one questions whether, by the end of this century, it will be possible to do so outside of the confines of a heritage park or museum. □

NOTES

1. Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920* (Toronto: McMillan of Canada, 1974), pp. 23-63.
2. John Warkentin, "Manitoba Settlement Patterns," *Transactions, Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, Series III, No. 16, 1961, pp. 62-77.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
4. David K. Butterfield and Edward M. Ledehowski, *Architectural Heritage, the MSTW Planning District*, (Winnipeg: Department of Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Historic Resources Branch, Province of Manitoba, 1984), pp. 95.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-99.
6. Vladimir J. Kaye, *Early Ukrainian Settlements in Canada 1885-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Ukrainian Canadian Research Foundation, 1964, p. 225.
7. John C. Lehr, "Kinship and Society in the Ukrainian Pioneer Settlement of the Canadian West," *Canadian Geographer* 29 (3: 1985): 207-219.
8. John C. Lehr, "The Log Buildings of Ukrainian Settlers in Western Canada," *Prairie Forum* 5 (2: 1980): 183-196; see also *idem*, "Ukrainian Pioneer Architecture in the Prairie West," *Selected Papers from the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, Volume I (Ottawa: SSAC, 1981), pp. 8-21. For a detailed examination of the Ukrainian buildings still present in part of the Interlake region of Manitoba, see, Edward Ledehowski and David K. Butterfield, *Architectural Heritage: The Eastern Interlake Planning District* (Winnipeg: Department of Cultural Affairs and Historical Resources, Province of Manitoba, 1983), pp. 55-91.
9. See William C. Wonders, "Log Dwellings in Canadian Folk Architecture," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69 (2: 1979): 204.
10. Robert Hunter, "Ukrainian Canadian Folk Architecture: The Churches of Father Philip Ruh," *Selected Papers, Society for the Study of Architecture on Canada*, Volume 5 (Ottawa: SSAC, 1982), pp. 24-29.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 26.



Floor plans of Ukrainian folk houses. The two-room variant predominates among those built by settlers from Halychyna; the three-room version among those built by settlers from Bukovyna.