

# UKRAINIAN FARM BUILDINGS

## An Architectural History Theme Study



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***On the cover:***

Lemecha *komora*, ca. 1920.

A *komora*, or tool shed, was a standard component of early Ukrainians farmyards, used to store harnesses, hand tools, small equipment and other items, and often featured a distinctive gable front projection.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE .....	1
EASTERN EUROPEAN BUILDING TRADITIONS .....	2
EASTERN EUROPEAN BUILDING TRADITIONS IN MANITOBA .....	12
First Ukrainian Buildings in Manitoba (1897-1915) .....	12
Later Ukrainian Log Houses (1915-1940) .....	19
German and Polish Houses .....	28
Farm Outbuildings .....	33
Barns .....	34
Granaries .....	47
Chicken Coops .....	49
Tool Sheds .....	51
Summer Kitchens .....	55

# PREFACE

This booklet has been adapted from a larger publication developed in 1982 by the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism. That study, *Architectural Heritage. The Eastern Interlake Planning District*, should still be available in public libraries.

That original study was intended to assist various local governments (Rural Municipalities of Gimli and Bifrost and Town of Gimli), formed into the Eastern Interlake Planning District, to gain a better understanding of the architectural heritage of the region, and thus to undertake better educational, tourism, designation and conservation programs. To that end, this original work also contained a substantial selected inventory of buildings in the area, and sections focusing on other aspects of the region's history.

A major part of the study focused on farm buildings, and especially on the prevailing architectural traditions of one of the most common pioneer settlement group in the region – originally from Ukraine, Germany and Poland. It is that section of the original report that has been adapted here, to enable readers to get a better sense of the traditional architectural styles and forms, materials and construction practices that define this important aspect of Manitoba's architectural history.

There are other areas of the province that have similar eastern European building traditions, and this booklet, while focused on the area around Gimli, certainly contains information that applies to those places as well.

## EASTERN EUROPEAN BUILDING TRADITIONS

The residences and farm structures built by the three ethnic groups from Eastern Europe, the Ukrainians and the Germans and Poles, provide direct evidence of the influence of another architectural heritage. The numerous Ukrainian structures, unlike Icelandic contemporaries, had features that were often directly transferred from their original context, and are therefore especially interesting. The German and Polish settlers, though considerably lesser in numbers also produced some distinctive buildings worthy of study.

By the time Ukrainian immigration to Canada began in the 1890s, folk architecture in the Ukraine had been developing since the fourteenth century. Styles and techniques of construction had become entrenched in the culture, and in many cases they reached a high level of skill and artistry.

The peasants, operating within a very restricted economy, constructed their homes with a minimum of materials, which included timber, mud plaster and grass. These items were common to all Ukrainian folk dwellings, and appeared in varying proportions depending upon their availability. Although distinctive regional characteristics had developed in response to local economic, environmental and social factors, most of the traditional folk housing followed a relatively basic form (Figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
Examples of folk houses in districts of the western Ukraine at the close of the nineteenth century (V.P. Samojlovych, *Ukrains' ke Narodne*. Kiev: Navakova Dumka, 1972)

The rectangular plan of the typical Ukrainian folk dwelling always allowed for two major interior spaces: the "Velyka Khata" (large room) at the east end and the "Mala Khata" (small room) at the west end.

The plan was invariably oriented east-west longitudinally, the only entry and most of the windows both facing south. The Mala Khata was the family work room where the hub of daily activity occurred: cooking, washing, eating and sleeping. It was here that the traditional massive clay cookstove or "pich" was located. The large food preparation area and cooking surface of the pich was often used as a sleeping area for the children as it radiated heat long after the fire had ceased to burn. This was especially useful during the cold winter months. The larger of the two major rooms, the velyka khata, literally "the big house", was accorded special status. The room was usually used only on ceremonial occasions such as Christmas and Easter, or for the reception and accommodation of guests. Larger families, more pressed for space, would use the room as the parents' bedroom. The east wall of this room was traditionally hung with icons, religious calendars, family photographs, and was decorated with embroidered linens and arrangements of dried flowers.

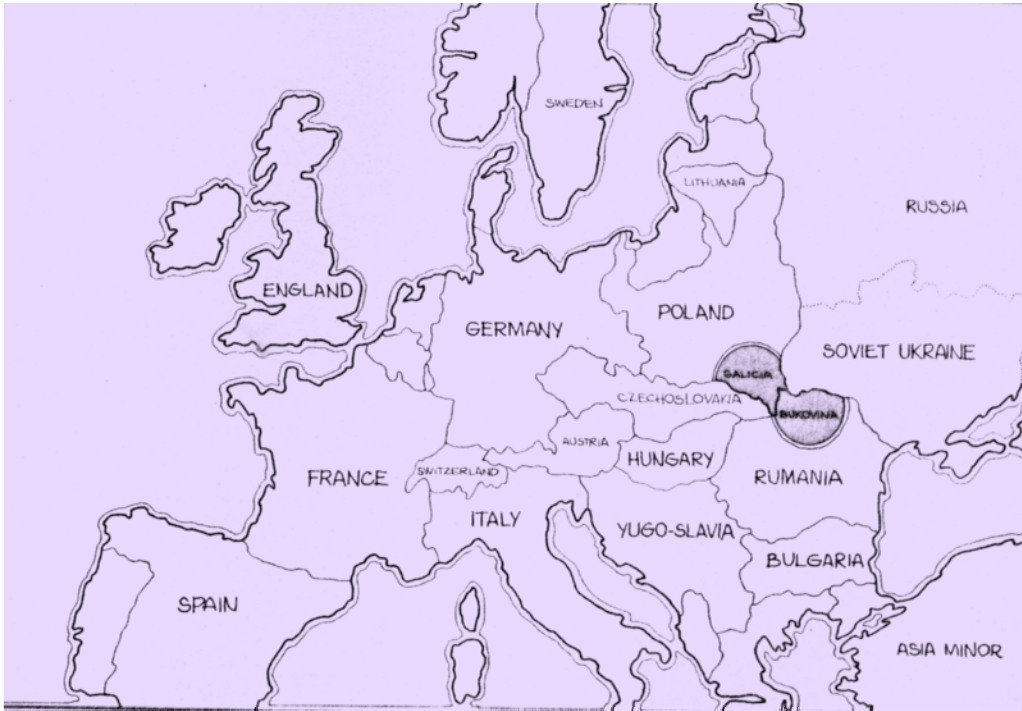
In the western Ukraine, where the majority of the immigrants to Canada originated, log construction was most common. There were three different construction methods used: horizontal log construction with dovetailed or saddle-notched corners, post and fill (known as Red River Frame in western Canada) and vertical log construction in which the walls were secured by top and bottom sills. The horizontal construction method was favoured, but in areas deficient of good timber, post and fill construction was common. The vertical log method was used only occasionally.

The Ukrainian cottage was usually finished inside and out with a thick layer of plaster. It consisted of a mixture of clay, sand, and water, supplemented with a combination of chopped straw and horse or cow dung (to prevent the plaster from cracking as it dried). This plaster parging sealed and insulated the walls. A coarser base layer was generally covered with a finer-grained finish to which lime and dyes, such as laundry blueings, were added. These procedures brought out the whiteness of the lime and provided the walls with a smooth hard finish. Patterns were often traced out with blue or yellow dye over the white of the lime, or else a wide band of colour was applied to the lower portions of the walls.

The steeped thatched roof was one of the more distinctive features of the dwellings in the western Ukraine. Although the thatch material often varied, rye straw was preferred for its durability. The thatch roof was cheap and easy to construct, and when carefully tied was not only waterproof but heat retentive. The roof, if properly maintained, could last up to 50 years.

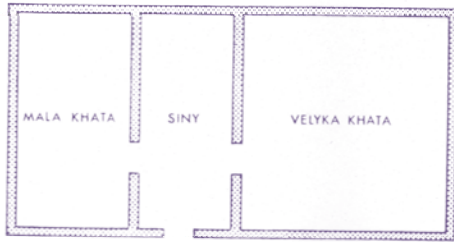
This basic house type saw two distinct regional variations in the Ukrainian provinces of Bukovyna and Galicia, where most of the Ukrainian immigrants to Manitoba originated (Figure 2). The Bukovynians built houses which were generally larger and more ornate than the Galicians (Figure 3).



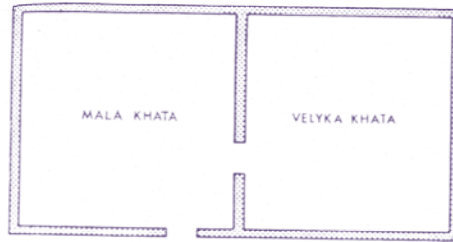


**Figure 2**

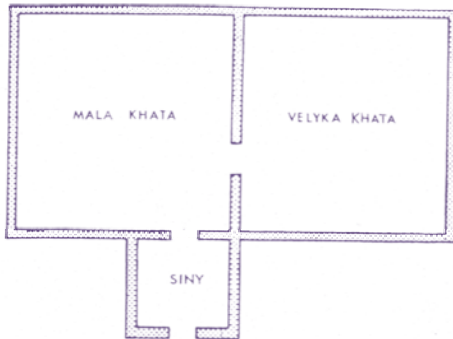
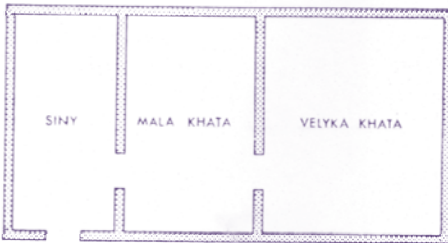
Europe in the 1920s. The locations of the former Ukrainian provinces of Galicia and Bukovyna are identified in the vicinity of the Polish-Rumanian border.



BUKOVYNIAN



GALICIAN



**Figure 3**  
Typical plans of houses built by  
Ukrainian settlers from the Bukovynian  
and Galician districts.

These were usually three-roomed structures with a centrally located doorway (often sheltered with a gable-roofed porch extension) which opened onto a small entrance hall of "siny" (Figure 4).

They were characterized by hipped or hipped-gable roofs, with a prominent eave overhang on all sides especially pronounced along the front wall. The overhang, supported by a number of wooden posts formed a verandah. At the corners of the house the exterior walls often flared out towards the top to form eave brackets, which were decoratively carved. The houses were further enhanced by decorative patterns and coloured trim.

The Galician style, on the other hand, displayed the influence of the more sober and familiar styles of northwestern Europe (Figure 5). Most Galician houses had only two rooms and a simple gable or hipped-gable roof. Rarely did they have the same prominent overhang, and in consequence eave brackets were less common, and were always less pronounced. The buildings with gable roofs frequently had a distinctive pent extension on each gable end at the eave level to protect the plaster from rainwater damage (Figure 6).

The gable itself was not plastered, but was generally filled with vertical weatherboard. While the first Ukrainian settlers in the Interlake were clearly more familiar with log construction than their Icelandic neighbours, the time of their arrival required the erection of more temporary shelters. The construction of the elaborate log structures of their homeland would have to wait.



**Figure 4**

An early house built by Ukrainian settlers from Bukovyna. This example stands near Vita, in southeastern Manitoba. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)



**Figure 5**  
An abandoned early Galician house type, near Gimli (Provincial Archives Manitoba)



**Figure 6**

A former Ukrainian folk house near Ledwyn, Manitoba. The vertical weather boards and prominent pent extension on the gable ends were a common feature on early Galician homes.