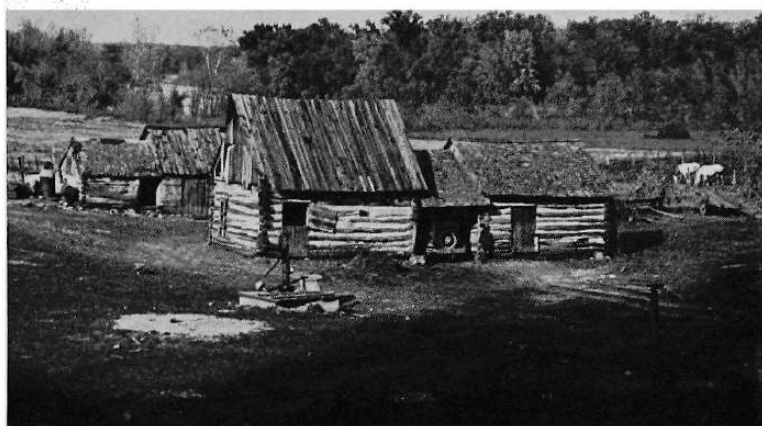


LOG buildings
on a farm
near Henderson, 1940



Collecting LOG CABINS

A Photographer's Hobby

PAUL W. KLAMMER

LOG CABINS first attracted my attention in 1925, when, as a fifth-grade pupil in the Chaska public schools I was fascinated by a picture of such a building in a textbook. Tales of frontier life told by my eighty-year-old grandfather, A. A. Klammer, a pioneer settler in the Big Woods area of southern Minnesota, stimulated my interest, which continued and expanded in the 1930s when I traveled extensively by automobile with my father, K. K. Klammer. He had developed an interest in archaeology, and while he searched far and wide for arrowheads and other remains of Indian culture, I took note

MR. KLAMMER is a New Ulm photographer who has made a hobby of locating, photographing, and studying the construction of log cabins built by southern Minnesota pioneers.

of log buildings standing beside modern structures on numerous farms we passed. Finally, in 1939, after graduating from the Minneapolis School of Art, I began to take photographs of log cabins in the vicinity of Chaska, recording in pictures their shape, details of construction, condition, and the like.

Over the years I have built up a collection of more than two hundred photographs. Most of them were taken between 1939 and 1941, when I enlisted in the army, and after 1957, when my interest in the subject was revived. The collection now reflects a survey of log buildings in an area extending roughly from Chaska to New Ulm, in the Big Woods country and the Minnesota Valley. I have taken pictures of sixty-seven cabins, and I know of at least a dozen more that I hope to

photograph in the near future. I not only take from two to four views of each exterior, but from two to ten shots of interiors, obtaining pictorial records of corner construction and any unusual features. At the same time I record the measurements of overall size, corner cuts, intricate fittings, and other details. I also make an attempt to find out when and by whom the cabins were built, but in this I am not often successful. In a few instances, descendants of the builders are still living on the farms where a cabin stands, and they may be able to tell stories and report facts that are of some significance. For the most part, however, the old buildings must speak for themselves.

THE LOG HOUSES I have photographed were built during the era extending from the late 1850s to about 1890. Most of those in the New Ulm area were constructed after 1862, since earlier structures were destroyed in the Sioux Outbreak of that year. They were built largely of oak, elm, and other types of hard-

wood native to the area, cut on the spot by pioneer settlers. The logs sometimes were used just as they came from the trees, with the bark on them. In other cases they were peeled, hewn to give them one or more flat surfaces, split, or even sawed on one or more faces.

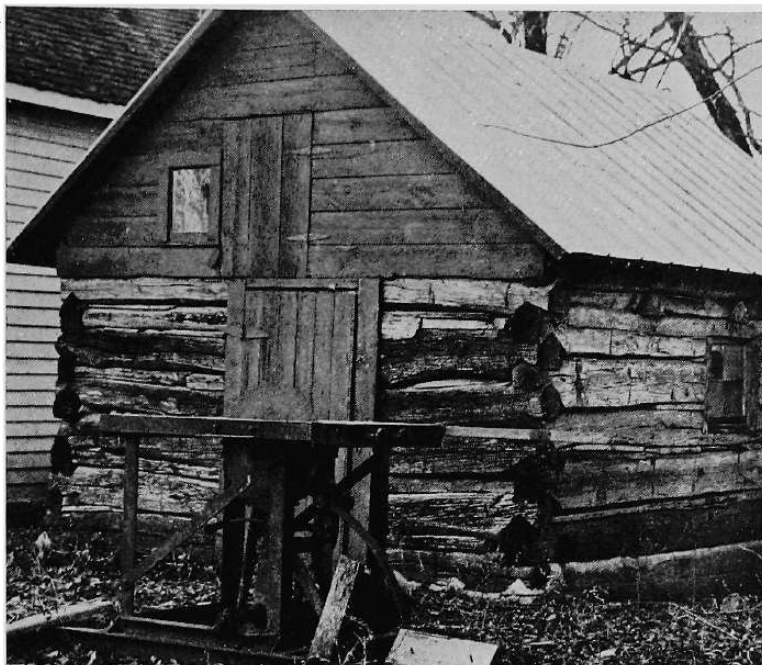
The walls of all cabins I have examined and photographed are constructed of logs placed one above the other horizontally and joined at the corners by notches. These are contrived to hold the logs securely in place, both vertically and horizontally, and they are cut by methods that obviously required great skill on the part of the axman. The best notching I have seen locks each log into place firmly, accurately, and with a weather-proof fit. Furthermore, the notches are cut to slope slightly toward the outside, so that water or moisture will drain off and help prevent rot.

Examples of seven types of notching were found in the buildings I have photographed. Among them are the saddle notch, the dove-



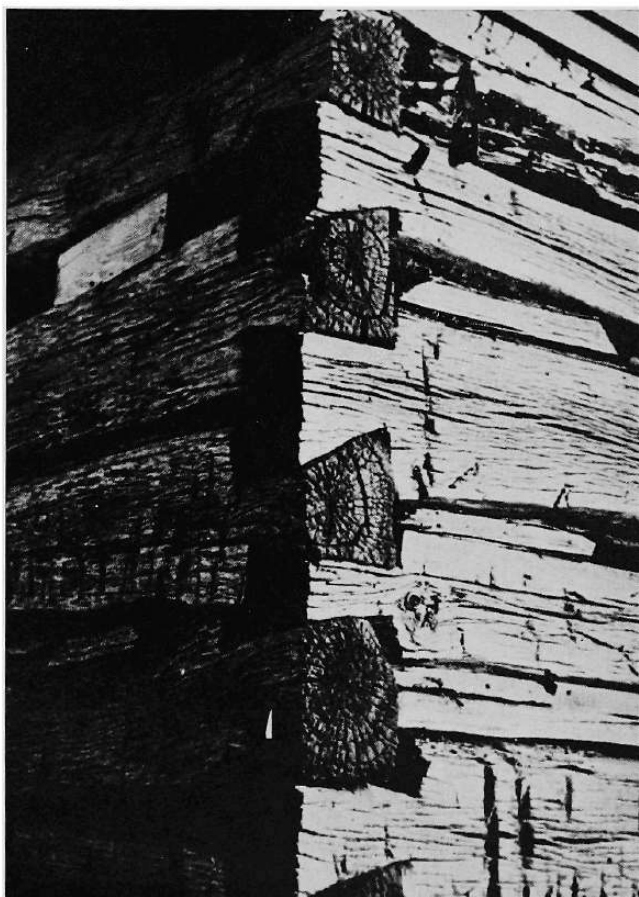
THIS log house near East Union in Carver County, photographed by the author in 1939, was the first cabin to interest him. It was built with dovetail corners by Scandinavian settlers.

IN building this log house near St. George in Nicollet County in 1867, John Schwab used one variation of the gable type of saddle notch. The logs were cut in a wood lot south of the Minnesota River in Brown County and hauled to Schwab's homestead in winter.



THIS corner of a log building on the Paul Lenz farm near Hyde Lake in Waconia Township, Carver County, photographed in 1941, shows square-hewn notching, large interstices, and chinking of wood and cement.

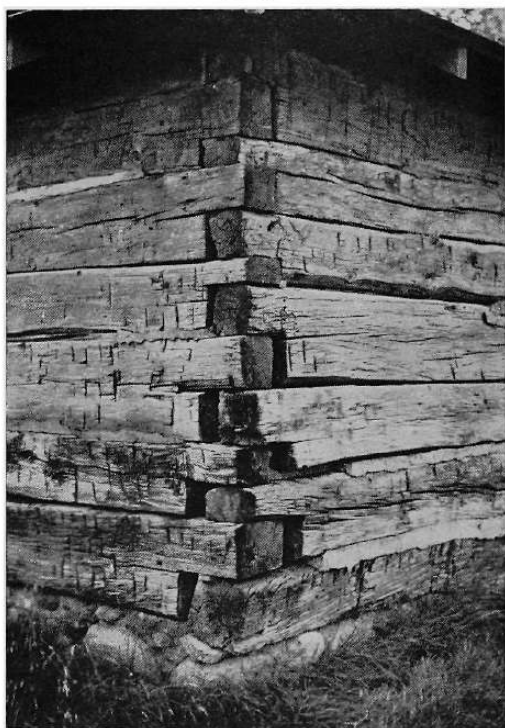
TYPICAL dovetail notching and careful chinking were used in the construction of the corner pictured below. It is from a log building photographed in 1941 in Carver County near Cologne.





*SHORT logs were used for spacing the interior rafters of this barn near Cologne.
Photographed in 1941.*

DETAIL of the Fort Ridgely powder house, showing the "blockhouse" type of corner construction. Photographed in 1958.



tail corner, the square-hewn corner, and the so-called "blockhouse" type of corner construction. The saddle notch was generally used with round logs. Such notches sometimes were fitted by means of semicircular grooves, and in other instances with gable-shaped peaks that marked the exact top center of the log. I have encountered three distinct variations of the gable type of saddle notching. Dovetail corners were commonly used with hewn logs, and the fitting was very accurate and unusually tight. Square-hewn corners, which were locked with wooden pins, have been found only rarely in the area covered by this survey. The "blockhouse" type of notching, produced by the halved cornering of hewn logs, has been encountered only once; appropriately it was used in the construction of the powder house at Fort Ridgely.

In general, more skill was required for building with square-hewn than with round logs, but the use of the former resulted in better buildings. Walls of uniform thickness could be produced with square-hewn logs, facilitating good chinking as well as ease in

covering the exterior with siding and the inside with plaster. A well-built wall was supported only at the corners, and it took careful hewing to make the logs fit tightly. Chinking was unnecessary in such skillfully constructed buildings. Most of the log buildings I have examined, however, required chinking. Spaces between logs were filled with bits of smaller logs that had been cut to fit the openings and tightly jammed in. All remaining openings were then filled with plaster made from mud or clay mixed with grass or hay, or with concrete.

MOST OF THE Minnesota pioneers who built cabins used skills they or their forebears had acquired in Europe. Immigrants from the wooded areas of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and northern Russia, or from the forest lands of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland had been familiar with log dwellings in their homelands and knew how to build them. Swedes built log houses near Delaware Bay in the seventeenth century, and gradually settlers who understood the techniques used in such structures moved westward. By 1849, when Minnesota Territory was organized, many of the newcomers who were settling in the West were familiar with log cabin construction.

Among the cabins I have studied, certain general characteristics marked those built by given nationality groups. The Scandina-

vians, for example, seem always to have used the dovetail type of corner notching. They selected large logs, which they carefully sawed or hewed, and they erected neat and substantial buildings. The Germans and Austrians, on the other hand, employed several types of corner notching, featuring the gable type of saddle notch, and their workmanship varied greatly in quality. The Irish, who regularly used dovetail corners, usually did poor construction work.

Most of the log dwellings I have encountered had windows, though north walls often remained unbroken in the interest of warmth. Windows usually were double hung, with six lights in each half. To keep the walls rigid and solid, special devices were required around the openings for doors and windows. Some interesting examples were found in a log cabin built about 1862 by George Brand and recently dismantled on a farm now owned by Walter Brandel at St. George. Wooden pins about two inches in diameter had been inserted in the ends of the logs and used to support timbers or planks to which the sides of the window and door frames were nailed.

The construction of weatherproof roofs from materials available on the frontier posed special problems. By the second half of the nineteenth century, when the cabins I have photographed were built, inexpensive lumber was available in southern Minnesota

HOUSE of
huge sawed logs
in Linden Township,
Brown County





HOUSE built by Irish settlers, members of the Robinson family, in West Newton Township, Nicollet County, as it looked in 1910

—the product of small sawmills scattered throughout the area and some larger ones operating both in Wisconsin and Minnesota. As a result, all the cabins I have examined had roofs made of sawed timbers and shingles. Cabins built earlier or in other areas often were roofed with sod, with thick bark, or with handmade shingles or shakes fashioned from large logs with either a froe or an ax.

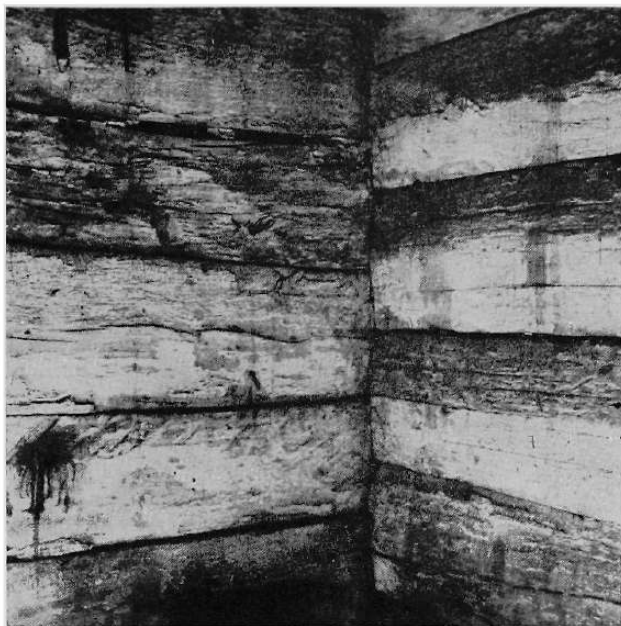
Methods of finishing log buildings varied greatly. In the barns and many of the dwellings I have photographed, round or hewn logs were left in their natural state both on the outside and the interior, though the inside walls of the houses sometimes were whitewashed or painted. Those in one abandoned log house I saw near New Ulm were covered with layer upon layer of wallpaper and newspapers, the most recent dating from 1908. Several log buildings in the same vicinity had been covered with siding on the outside and lathed and plastered on the inside. Such buildings make excellent permanent dwellings, since they are well insulated, easy to heat in winter, and cool in summer.¹

Log houses that have been treated in this

manner are still being used as residences in southern Minnesota. Some are equipped with all modern conveniences, including gas furnaces, and are topped by the inevitable television antenna. Of course one can only learn about such houses by word of mouth, since the logs are completely covered, and the buildings look like ordinary frame houses. Other log buildings are still in use as barns, chicken houses, workshops, and the like on farms in the vicinity of Chaska and New Ulm. Reproduced herewith are a few of my photographs of such structures, as well as of log buildings that are no longer standing.

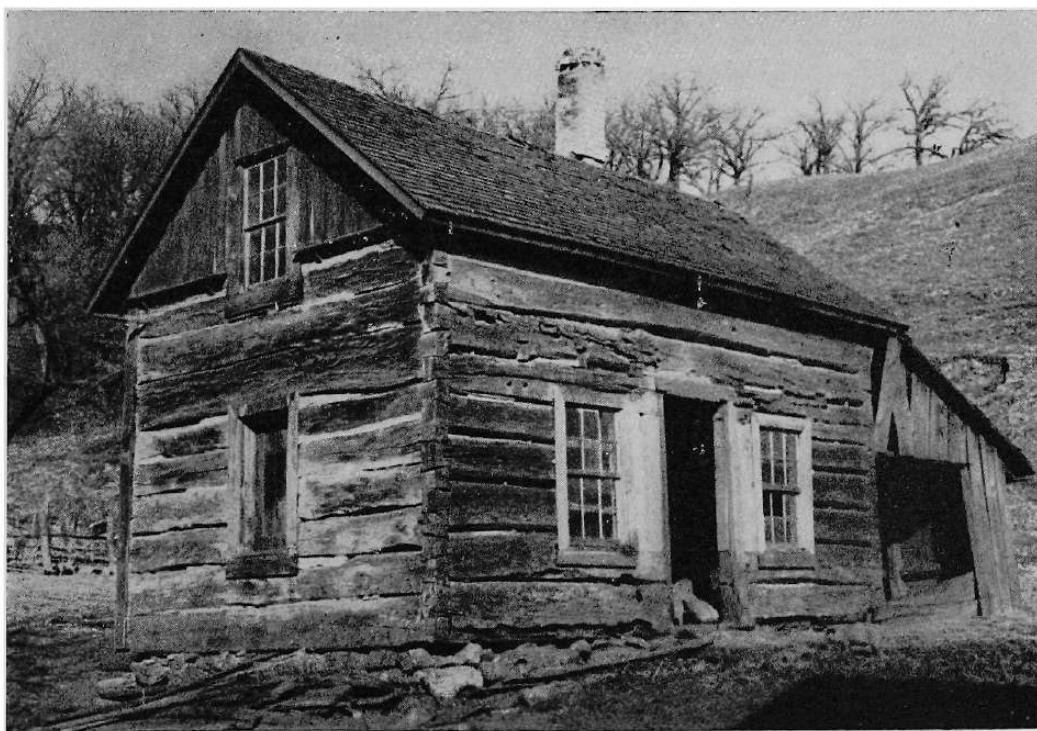
¹ Publications that I have found useful in my study of log cabins include Harold R. Shurtleff, *The Log Cabin Myth: A Study of the Early Dwellings of the English Colonists of North America* (Cambridge, 1939); Wilbur Zelinsky, "The Log House in Georgia," in the *Geographical Review*, 43:173-193 (April, 1953); and Frank Gilbert Roe, "The Old Log House in Western Canada," in the *Alberta Historical Review*, Spring, 1958, p. 1-9. Among pioneers interviewed were G. S. Johnson, who built a cabin near East Union in 1881, and Henry G. Kohn of New Ulm, who was born and lived for many years in a log house in Courtland Township.

*INTERIOR corner of the
cabin pictured below,
showing the tight fitting that
characterized the best
dovetail work*



THE house illustrated below was built in San Francisco Township, Carver County, by G. S. Johnson in 1881 on a farm owned by C. R. Lundquist in 1941, when the cabin was photographed. It was expertly constructed, typifying the best log houses of the area.

Among its features were large logs with sawed surfaces, dovetail corners, double-hung windows, a good roof, a substantial chimney, drainboards in the gable, and white-washed walls on the inside, where the date of completion was carved on a log.





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