

DARKROOM DETECTIVE

Background

Looking for Evidence



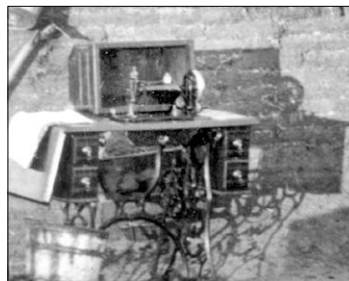
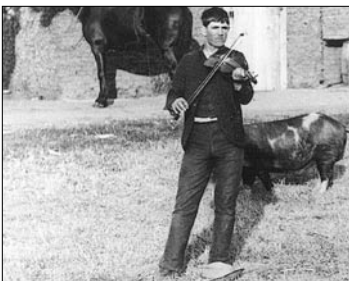
Solomon D. Butcher in front of his dugout—self portrait.

Historians use several types of evidence to learn about what it was like to live in a sod house. They study diaries and letters written by people who lived in them, stories handed down through families, surviving sod houses, photographs, and objects that homesteaders used.

The man who took the photographs in this activity was named Solomon Butcher. Much of what we know about living in sod houses is based on Mr. Butcher's photographs. He moved to South Dakota to "stake a claim,"

but quickly discovered that he was not cut out to be a farmer. Instead, he supported himself by traveling from homestead to homestead, taking pictures of families who lived in sod houses. His photographs are one of the most important sources of information that historians study about this way of life.

People often included things in their picture that would make them look successful, like musical instruments, sewing machines, children's toys, livestock and watermelons!



Photos courtesy of the South Dakota Historical Society.

Photographs can be important sources of information, but they don't always represent the truth. It is always important to ask yourself three questions before you accept photographs as good sources:

1. Why was this photograph taken?
2. What message was the photographer trying to send with the photograph?
3. Is this a photograph of something that happened naturally or was the photograph posed?

Keep these questions in mind as you explore photographs of two families to uncover clues about life in a sod house. Look closely at the photographs, think about the questions below, and try to answer them. Once you've completed the activity, apply those same questions to family photographs you have at home!

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Looking for Evidence

See what you can discover by investigating photographs of two families who lived in homes made of sod. See what you can discover by looking at the two photographs that accompany the activity.

Materials

You Will Need These Things

- Photographs of two families who lived in homes made of sod (download and print)
- Magnifying glass (optional)
- The questions of the following page

Photo 1



The Jerry Shores House by Solomon D. Butcher. Courtesy of the Nebraska Historical Society.

Image:

Former slave Jerry Shores (4th from the left) and his family, Custer County, Nebraska, 1887. Mr. Shores lived next to Moses Speese, his brother. The brothers had different names because they had taken the names of their masters when they escaped slavery by way of the Underground Railroad during the Civil War.

Photo 2



The Virgil Allen Family by Solomon D. Butcher. Courtesy of the Nebraska Historical Society.

Image:

The Virgil Allen family, Custer County Nebraska 1892. A wagonload of sod stands ready to repair the roof.

Detective Questions

Make a list of the people in the photograph.

Why are they in this picture together? How do you know?

What types of animals are in the photograph?

Why do you think they were included?

What objects can you find in the photograph?

What do they tell you about the people's lives?

Can you tell what time of year it is by looking at the photograph?

How? (Hint: look at the shadows.)

Detective Questions

Which photograph features a dugout and which features a sod house?

What do you think happened just before the photograph was taken?

What do you think happened just afterwards?

Look at photograph #2.

Why are the little boy and the woman whose lap he is sitting on both blurry?
