

# Get a "SENSE" of it

## Objective

Get a sense of what it was like to live in a sod house by recreating some of the dimensions, features, and smells that existed in sod houses. Enjoy a sod house snack and try posing for an old-time photograph!

## Background

### Meet the Cram Family

Solomon Butcher took this picture of the Cram family (at right) in 1886. While you can never really know what it was like to live in a sod house 140 years ago, you can begin to get an idea by trying the activities on the following pages.



The J. C. Cram family sod house, Loup County, Nebraska, 1886.



Early settlers cutting sod.



Miss Mary Longfellow holding a claim.

## Get a Sense of: The Size of a Sod House



### Materials

#### You Will Need These Things

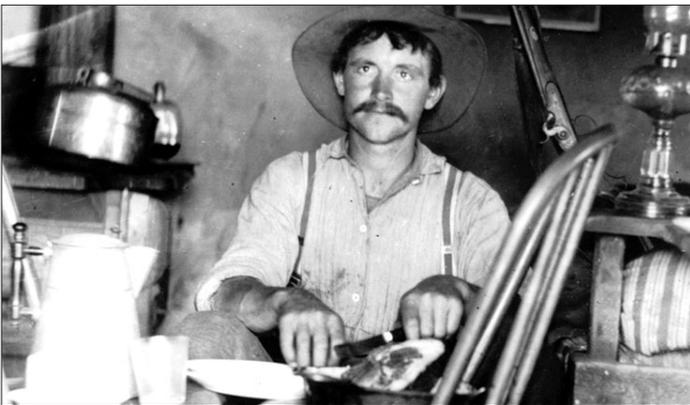
- Five people
- Measuring tape or yardstick
- Masking tape

J. C. Cram Family sod house.

### Instructions

1. Use a measuring tape or ruler to mark out a 16 foot x 20 foot rectangle on the floor of your classroom or a nearby playground.
2. Now measure three feet in from your outline and put down another row of tape all around the inside of your sod house. These rows of tape represent the inside and outside of the walls of a typical sod house. Consider how these walls compare with the walls of a contemporary house.
3. Choose five people to pretend that they are the Cram family.
4. Step inside your sod house. Where would everyone, sleep, sit, or eat? What would you do during the long cold winter months?

## Get a Sense of: Living Without Electricity



### Materials

#### You Will Need These Things

- A room with windows
- Blinds or curtains that can be drawn over the windows

Sod house bachelor

### Instructions

Electric lights had not been invented yet and most houses only had one window.

1. Turn off all of the lights and lower all but one of the blinds in the room.
2. Ask yourself these questions:  
  
How does this light compare to the light in a sod house?  
  
How would this change my way of life?

# Get a Sense of: What a Sod House Smelled Like

## Materials

### You Will Need These Things

- A jar that you can shut tightly or a self-sealing plastic bag
- Dirt and a piece of sod (inexpensive rolls of sod are available at hardware or garden stores for most of the year)

## Instructions.

1. Fill up a jar or self-sealing plastic bags with some dirt and a piece of sod.
2. Water the sod and close the bag/jar.
3. Leave the jar in a warm sunny place for a day.
4. Open the container and smell.

This is the smell of a sod house on a rainy day. Of course, the thing that you are missing is the smell of freshly baked bread and soup cooking on the fire.

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# Get a Sense of: Posing for a Photograph



## Materials

### You Will Need These Things

- Your imagination
- A chair
- A clock with a second hand

Virgil Allen family members.

## Instructions

Having your picture was still quite a novelty in the 1860s. It required a special skill—the ability to sit or stand perfectly still for over a minute. Think you can do it? Give it a try.

1. Ask a friend to time you for one minute.
2. Sit up straight, smile, and see if you can sit still for 60 seconds.

How did you do? Would your picture have been nice and sharp or blurry? Maybe that is why no one is ever smiling in old pictures.

# Get a Sense of: A Sod House Treat

## Materials

### You Will Need These Things



- Watermelon or popcorn
- An adult

J. C. Cram Family sod house.

## Instructions

Food on the prairie was sometimes hard to come by. Drought, prairie fires, insects, a long winter, or too much rain could all affect your food supply. The kind of sugar we use today was expensive and very difficult to get, so settlers sweetened their baked goods with sorghum molasses. Watermelon in the summer and popcorn in the fall and winter were treats that were usually available.

1. Ask an adult to help you cut the watermelon or pop the popcorn.
2. Sit back and enjoy your snack. Imagine how good this treat would taste if you had grown it yourself!

Photos by Solomon D. Butcher. Courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.