



AT THE OLD STOVE, Lesa Juenemann (above) showed off the old-fashioned popcorn popper on the wood/coal stove while her husband Fred watched. Mr. Juenemann (left) worked at the pump. He is the son of Eula Juenemann of Oberlin.



Original soddy serves as spot for vacations

By SHARON CORCORAN
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You notice the wind sweeping over the prairie grass as you bump along on the dirt road. As you pull into the driveway, the soddy looks small against the backdrop of grassy pasture on hills rolling for miles around.

As you enter the nearly 100-year-old sod house, you can't help thinking how adorable the little wood/coal stove in the kitchen is and wonder whether the pump at the kitchen sink works. (It does.)

As you take a look around, you notice how thick the walls are (about two feet), how rustic the decor and how old the black-and-white photos on the walls.

You can't help feeling you have stepped back in time, as you forget the horsepower that brought you here was under the hood and you really don't notice the electric lights. (You're used to those, after all.)

Call it a real prairie experience. City folks seem to like it.

The Minor Family Sod House Bed and Breakfast, 17 miles north of Brewster and a little west, was built in 1907, later than most, and is one of few surviving original soddies.

Nestled in an area steeped in history, the soddy is a reminder of times past. In the southwest corner of Rawlins County, near the Cheyenne, Sherman and Thomas county borders, it is 2 1/2 miles from the site of the Dewey-Berry shoot-out in May 1903 and is near the Dewey Ranch and the site of the Kidder Massacre in 1867.

The owners are Fred and Lesa Juenemann. She is the great-granddaughter of Tom and Mary Minor, who bought the house in 1909 and became friends with their neighbors and former owners of the property, the Deweys. Her husband, Fred, is the son of Eula Juenemann of Oberlin.

The Juenemanns are helping to

keep the history of northwest Kansas alive by preserving the soddy and by providing plenty of historic reading material, with pictures, for their guests.

Several books and scrapbooks on the large round table in the parlor tell tales of the Kidder Massacre, the Dewey-Berry gun fight, the Last Vigilante Hanging in Kansas, the Cheyenne Hole Massacre, Fort Wallace and Sheridan, the wickedest little town in Kansas. There are also books telling about sod houses and how they were built.

The soddy, which served as a post office and was on the map as Minor, Kan., is on the National Register of Historic Places for two reasons, Fred Juenemann said: because it's an original sod house and because there was a post office on the property for 10 years.

The post office was in the sod house for part of that time, he said, and was in a separate building that was also a grocery the rest. The Juenemanns have a post card addressed to Lela Minor (daughter of Tom and Mary Minor) at Minor, Kan., with the post mark.

There is no television in the house, but there is radio, a record player and cassettes of old-time radio shows. People love the calm and quiet, said Mr. Juenemann, and the sunsets and stars.

Some have enjoyed the storms, and others have enjoyed buffalo hunting at Ken and Laurie Klem's ranch nearby.

There has only been one couple who didn't like staying in the soddy, Mr. Juenemann said; they were kind of a "yuppie" couple who received the stay as a gift.

Others have enjoyed the trip back in time, and many have written in the guest book how much they liked the soddy. A family that stayed in the house during a fierce dust storm last year enjoyed their experience so much they came back and told others about the place.

They went into the house when the wind came up, Lesa Juenemann said, and they stayed inside until the storm was over. When they went out, she said, there were tree branches down all around their vehicle and a pile of dust had come in through one of the doors, but that didn't ruin their trip. They thought it was neat to see, Fred Juenemann said, and couldn't wait to come back to see what other sights the Kansas weather has in store.

A woman who had worked in the inner city in Chicago wrote in the guest book that the dark and quiet at the soddy rivaled the fear of the inner city.

"As I read that," he said, "I thought, 'Oh, no. She hated it,' but as I read on, she said she enjoyed it."

A couple came on the hottest, dirtiest day of the year three years ago, Lesa Juenemann said; they were from Kansas City, and he was president of a big hotel there.

They turned down the steak dinner, she said, and went to the town hot-dog/watermelon feed in Brewster.

"I thought they would hate it — they were used to luxury," she said, "but they loved it; they couldn't say enough about what a great time they had."

The family lived in the soddy until the early 1950s, Lesa Juenemann said, and it was restored in the early '60s. It was full of antiques, but had to be cleaned out in the '80s because thieves and vandals had broken in.

"Then Fred came along and said we were going to do a bed and breakfast," she said. "We thought he was crazy."

"I thought mom would support me," Fred Juenemann said, "but she thought I was crazy, too."

But they spent a year working on the soddy before opening the bed and breakfast in 2001.

It has been fun, Fred Juenemann said, and it's been a great way to keep up a piece of history.



ONE OF THE ROOMS in the sod house is an old-fashioned bedroom.