

POST-WORLD WAR II BASEMENT HOUSES IN CANTON,  
SOUTH DAKOTA: HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE  
FROM THE GROUND DOWN

by

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Basement houses are permanent dwellings in which the primary living spaces were placed within an excavated area. Most common during times of economic hardship and housing crisis, they were true starter homes, often expanded through the construction of a superstructure. Although common in the Midwestern United States, basement houses are seldom acknowledged nor understood.

This study addresses the trend of basement house construction in Canton, South Dakota, where nine basement houses were constructed shortly after the conclusion of World War II. Of these nine, one house remains as a basement; eight were vertically expanded prior to 1960. Based on the features of these nine examples and several basement houses located elsewhere within the state of South Dakota, several issues of their preservation are discussed. The historic significance of basement houses is argued, and guidelines are suggested as to their identification and preservation.

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## DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Jane Carl Lunder,  
and to my rock, Sheldon Dallas Berg.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

At the core of historic preservation is understanding the significance of historic resources, evidence of an area's history, architecture, archeology, engineering or culture, as understood through representative physical characteristics. Significance is evaluated when nominating properties to the National Register of Historic Places, the cornerstone of historic preservation in the United States, and in planning for the identification and preservation of historic resources. It is with these goals of identifying, protecting, and honoring historic resources that I have formulated, researched, and written this thesis about a unique twentieth-century building trend which I consider historically and architecturally significant, the basement house.

#### The Basement House

Basement houses seem to be a form unique to the northern United States and are particularly common in the Midwest. Constructed from 1910-1955, they are not widely understood or acknowledged, yet their physical and



historical characteristics are so distinctive as to allow them to be distinguished and identified.

## Nomenclature

### Use of Term "Basement House"

Throughout this thesis, the term "basement house" describes a dwelling which has, at any time in its history, been solely a basement structure. For those which remain as basements, this is an easily identifiable term. Yet as shall be demonstrated in the following pages, a number of houses have had a superstructure completed above-ground, and the labeling of them as "basement houses" when they appear to be more than that becomes somewhat problematic. It is my reasoning that later expanded examples of basement houses should continue to be called basement houses because their history as basement structures is the basis for their significance.

However, "basement house" does not adequately describe the physical character of these examples, and future identification efforts may unintentionally exclude them, since many people do not and cannot recognize them as the basement houses they once were. For that reason a more fitting term must be sought. I have resisted doing so because the scope of this study is small and I do not wish to impose a term on this form that



may be inappropriate. Certainly regional variances in terminology exist, and it is quite possible that what is known as a basement house in the Midwest may be understood by a different name elsewhere in the country (or the world, for that matter).

### "Hope House"

There are two terms which may be more applicable to this type of building. I have heard the term "hope house" used to describe some basement-house-like structures in Idaho.<sup>1</sup> "Hope house" is wonderfully evocative of the sense of expectation which many of the original homeowners must have felt, and should be considered as a national term of reference. Another term which may be fitting is "expansible house." Several period publications by national popular magazines and the U.S. Government Printing Office have used this term,<sup>2</sup> and it seems to apply to the phased-in character of basement houses. However, "expansible" may refer to other schemes for home expansion, such as removable room dividers, the extension of exterior walls, the conversion of enclosed porches, and so on.<sup>3</sup> This term may then be too broad to adequately describe the distinct form and construction phases of a basement house.

## Common Physical Characteristics

Basement houses, as they have been defined through surveyed examples, can be identified by several distinctive physical features, including their forms and materials. The form of the underground basement house is quite noticeable, as it usually contrasts with the typical Western view of a house as a structure which sits on top of the earth and projects upward. Most basement houses, however, were constructed with the intention that above-ground stories would be added to them in the future, and quite often this vertical expansion has taken place. Therefore, only those that remain as solely basements are easily identified.<sup>4</sup>

### Form

In a basement house, the primary living space was placed within an excavated area. The resulting exterior appearance was an odd one of short walls, capped by a roof and accompanied by a projecting entrance. The exterior walls projected a few feet upward from the ground level, usually the same height as a standard house foundation. These walls most often contained rectangular windows which were short and wide, approximately 16 x 32 inches, due to the limited height of the walls. Occasionally larger windows were present, along with excavated window wells to allow more light to

penetrate the interior. With a little imagination, many basement houses look as if they were buried within a few feet of their eaves by a landslide (see Figure 76, Appendix A).

Basement house roof forms varied considerably. Steep gable or hipped roofs were often used, resulting in additional usable attic space. Flat roofs were also very common, and seem to have been the predominate roof type among later examples. Occasionally a compromise was sought between these two roofs, and took the form of an extremely shallow pitch gable roof, just steep enough to shed water.

Basement houses exhibit such a wide variety of entrance schemes that it is difficult to classify them. Often the entrance to a basement house was through an on-grade door, which led to a staircase which descended to the basement rooms. Although many of the staircases were incorporated into the main massing of the house, some were adjacent to the perimeter walls, and looked rather tacked-on. Projecting entrances may have been covered with a shed roof which followed the slant of the stairway, or topped by a flat or hipped roof. Basement houses with steep gable or hipped roofs were able to accommodate entrances in their gable ends, which resulted in the staircase being enclosed as part of the massing of the house. Occasionally other entrance schemes were used, such as excavated exterior stairways which led to a basement-level door. Sometimes the building site lent itself well to a daylight basement or basement-level garage, which afforded an on-grade



entry on the full-height elevation.

Since most basement houses were intended to have an above-ground superstructure built in the future, the perimeter walls and roof form of a basement house were constructed to simplify the conversion from a basement dwelling to a full-fledged house.

### Materials

The exterior walls of basement houses, most of which were built in the first half of the twentieth century, were most often constructed of concrete. Occasionally cast concrete was used, but concrete masonry units (concrete block) seemed to be widely preferred. The basement floors were poured concrete.

Basement houses with gable or hipped roofs used readily available roofing materials such as asphalt or wooden shingles. Flat roofed examples relied on tar paper and gravel.

Interior walls were constructed of wood studs finished with wallboard or of concrete block, in which case the interior walls served as bearing walls for the eventual superstructure. Where wood-stud walls were erected in the basement, the structural support afforded by the walls may have been supplemented by steel girders and lolly columns put in place to support the rafters. As above-ground stories were added to basement houses, their roof

rafters became the ground-level floor joists, and the projections of their basement walls became the foundation for the superstructure.

Windows and doors varied widely from house to house. As was mentioned earlier, sometimes window wells were constructed, which allowed for greater window height and more interior illumination, but standard height basement windows were also common. Doors were often recycled from other houses and buildings.<sup>5</sup>

### Permanence

The nature of the materials used and the manner in which they were constructed to carry additional weight demonstrates the intended permanence of basement houses. Unlike other temporary modes of post-World War II housing such as trailers, Quonset huts, and discarded barracks, most basement houses were intended to have above-ground structures erected on top of them in the future and to continue to serve their residents well as single family homes. Many basement houses were planned as full houses from the outset, with architectural plans purchased through plan services or designed by the homeowners themselves.<sup>6</sup> But occasionally the basement was built without much thought as to what would be placed on top of it and when, and sometimes the basement house changed hands before the original owners could construct the above-ground stories as they had

intended. This allowed a flexibility in the design and construction of the house which is unique to the incremental nature of basement house building.

In their above-ground construction, basement houses blended into the mainstream, demonstrating architectural styles which were favored by home owners across the nation during the postwar period. This renders improved basement houses virtually unrecognizable from other contemporary residential architecture in the neighborhood, and presents significant preservation problems which will be addressed in Chapter IV.

### Periods of Construction

My attempts to research the origin of basement house construction have been somewhat inconclusive, but one thing is evident: basement houses have been constructed during periods of economic or housing crisis. Considering the limitations that money, materials, or labor shortages impose, the basement house seems a logical solution. The phased-in construction of the house offered substantial shelter at a reasonable price, while building equity which the homeowners could then use to finance the remainder of the house.<sup>7</sup>



### Depression Era

There are a number of basement houses throughout the country which date from the period of the Great Depression (1929-1934) through the onset of World War II (1941). It is widely assumed that times were so difficult during the Depression that there was very little construction going on, and for the most part, this was so. However, there were certainly circumstances which demanded that new shelters be built to house families who had moved or outgrown their previous residence, and the basement house seemed to be a viable solution in that case. As mentioned earlier, a concrete-block basement could be constructed for a very reasonable cost and lived in until times were better and the family could afford to move upward. Undoubtedly, a basement house stood not only as shelter, but as a symbol of hope for future prosperity.

### Post World War II Era

Similarly, basement houses were constructed during the period immediately following the conclusion of World War II, when the United States faced the worst housing shortage in its history. Economics were not really the problem, as most Americans had managed to save money during four years of strict rationing, but materials were scarce and over a million new houses were needed, resulting in a backlog of construction and

thousands of homeless families.<sup>8</sup> Concrete was perhaps one of the most readily available materials, and the press told of projected availability dates for other necessary materials three to four years in the future.<sup>9</sup> Basement houses became a means by which people who wished to own a home could take the first steps toward building their dream house.

### Methodology of Case Study

This thesis will use the postwar basement houses in Canton, South Dakota as a case study and means of illustrating the history, characteristics, and preservation issues of these resources as a whole. Canton contains a number of basement houses dating from the decade following the conclusion of World War II (1945-1955). Additional basement house examples from towns and cities throughout South Dakota and the Midwest were also surveyed in order to provide a more accurate historical and physical context. From these resources, a number of assumptions and conclusions have been drawn which form the basis of this thesis.

### Case Study: Canton

The town of Canton is located along the Big Sioux River in the southeastern corner of South Dakota only miles from the Iowa border. In

many ways, Canton is typical of small towns throughout the Midwest. For decades, signs at the edge of town declared Canton the home of "2,600 Friendly Citizens." The population of Canton now stands at just over 2,700, and the "friendly citizens" claim has been dropped, possibly due to the recent establishment of a few large manufacturing industries which draw employees from the surrounding countryside and neighboring towns.

A recent essay in the Christian Science Monitor by a native New Yorker offers a fresh glimpse of Canton.

Canton was founded in 1867 by Norwegian settlers. Draw a line from this spot through the earth, the residents thought, and you would reach Canton, China. Hence the name. . .

New Yorkers enjoy walking. I decided to walk around Canton. I was attracted to the huge grain elevators in the center of town. They are the skyscrapers of Canton, about 10 stories high, towering above everything else. From a distance of many miles, gazing across the flat landscape, they stand out like cathedral spires or castle battlements.

The soybean harvest is in full swing, favored by warm, bright Indian summer days. The farmers work 'round the clock harvesting the crop. From fields, trucks carry the soybeans to town. At the grain elevators, the cargo is weighed and stored. . .

Many streets in Canton end at a cornfield. These fields surround the town. The opening words of "America, the Beautiful" – "O beautiful for spacious skies,/For amber waves of grain" – for the first time have a real meaning for me.

My ties are to the bridges, buildings, and bustling streets of New York. But if I had been born and raised and lived in Canton, my ties would be to the waxing fields of grain, the quilt-like pattern of farmlands seen for many miles in any direction, the massive grain elevators, . . the endless horizons.<sup>10</sup>

Amid this agricultural activity is the town of Canton, with a residential area set on a slight southern slope and a commercial center extending



southward from the Lincoln County Courthouse and surrounding square. At the eastern edge of Canton are the campus buildings of the former Augustana Academy, a private Lutheran high school which succeeded Augustana College when that institution moved to Sioux Falls. Augustana's Old Main has recently been rehabilitated as rental housing, and its boy's dorm is now home to Keystone, a residential alcohol rehabilitation center. Canton has two elementary schools, both built in the late 1960s and located at the northeast and southwest corners of town, and a central high school, located at the northern edge of town. Canton is home to several churches of varying denominations, street upon street of historic and well cared for houses, and lush street trees which buzz in the summer heat from the sound of cicadas.

During the postwar era, Canton was the center of a thriving farming community, and its ties to the surrounding agricultural landscape were even more pronounced. In the late 1940s, Canton extended to the north only as far as Elder Street,<sup>11</sup> and most of the town's streets ended at a cornfield. Canton's commercial area included an implement dealership, a movie theater, a bowling alley, and Noid's drugstore and ice cream parlor. Farm families and city residents alike came to town on Saturday nights to sell eggs and milk, buy groceries, go to the movies, eat ice cream, and hang out.

It is in the residential area that the town of Canton represents the extent of basement house construction that took place throughout the country during the postwar period. There were as many as eight basement

houses built in Canton after World War II, which amounted to a fair percentage of the new residential construction between 1946-1951.<sup>12</sup> A ninth example, located on a farm several miles northwest of Canton, was constructed beginning in 1952.

Of the nine basement houses in the Canton area, only one has not been vertically expanded. The presence of this easily identifiable basement house offers a physical and historical context by which the evolutionary character and history of the other examples can be more fully understood.

The presence of so many basement houses in a town the size of Canton is significant in and of itself. In all probability, few towns can boast such a high percentage of basement house building in such a short time period, which makes the phenomenon key to understanding the architectural, social, and economic history of Canton.

### Research Methods

Research of the Canton basement houses was conducted during two field visits in January and May of 1997. Three of the houses were identified as basement houses prior to the initial visit.

Oral histories were obtained from the present and previous homeowners, and public tax and deed records were consulted to establish the buildings' histories. During the interview process, I was informed of the

location of several other basement houses in Canton. Additional interviews were conducted with their owners when possible and again, public records were consulted. In addition, I searched historic editions of the local newspaper, the Sioux Valley News, for relevant information. This research, while not pinpointing the origins or construction histories of the basement houses, did result in a great deal of contextual information.

In researching and writing this thesis, I have relied heavily on the information provided by oral interviews with present and former owners of the properties. This is in part due to the fact that few written records exist to supplement the research. Sanborn Fire Insurance maps were not published for Canton or Sioux Falls after 1927 and updated only through 1943. Therefore none of the basement houses in Canton appear on the maps, and one can only guess at how their underground construction and unique materials were notated. Hopefully my research has uncovered all of the postwar basement houses that were built in Canton, but without being able to look at a citywide map or cultural resource survey which identifies them, I cannot unequivocally say so. Although building permits were required in Canton beginning in December, 1948, after which time all of the houses were constructed or added to, the original permits cannot be located. It is presumed by city staff and myself that they were discarded many years ago. These records would have been extremely valuable in establishing firm dates of construction, the names of the original homeowners and builders, and the



cost of construction. In addition, the county tax records are incomplete from the postwar period, and tax assessment values do not adequately illustrate the construction or extent of improvements to the properties. Furthermore, few of the original owners documented the construction of their houses photographically or verbally, so for most examples, the exact historic appearance can only be surmised.

### Regional Survey of Basement Houses

Oral interviews and casual conversations with Canton basement house owners, neighbors, relatives, and friends turned up stories of other basement houses throughout southeastern South Dakota. As a means of providing a historical and architectural context for the houses in Canton, I have undertaken an informal survey of these other basement houses and included the findings in this thesis. This research begins to illustrate the extent of this building phenomenon.

### Purpose of Study

I have undertaken this study of basement houses in Canton for several reasons. My mother's family has lived in Canton since the 1870s, and the history of the area is important to me. My grandparents have lived in a

former basement house (the Skyberg house) since 1960, and it is this house which originally piqued my interest in the trend. I am extremely interested in twentieth-century residential architecture, especially of the postwar period, and see basement houses as significant historic resources, the study of which presents future research opportunities in the fields of history, architecture, and historic preservation.

### Uniqueness of Form

Basement houses, due to their low profile, unusual massing, and contrast with neighboring houses and other buildings, are unique forms which are remarkably noticeable as structures on the landscape. Despite their humble appearance, their oddity almost demands that passersby take notice of them. Their physical characteristics are inherently illustrative of their owners' economic circumstances and local history, yet basement houses are often overlooked and ignored. When properly interpreted, basement houses could be extremely valuable as educational historic resources.

### Original Research

I chose to research and write about basement houses in part because they have not been addressed before in scholarly or popular publications. I

believe basement houses are significant resources which deserve to be studied and understood, as they will add value to our understanding of postwar American life. It is my hope that this thesis can inspire and encourage other scholars to conduct further research on basement houses and other examples of postwar residential architecture.

In fact, some survey efforts of basement houses have taken place. Nebraska has perhaps the most formal approach, as several basement houses have been included in recent historical buildings surveys.<sup>13</sup> I hope that this thesis will urge other Midwestern statewide and local preservation offices to search out potentially significant basement house buildings and aid in their identification and preservation.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Catherine Anne Dietrich and Whitney Hanson for this reference. "Hope house" has been used to describe basement houses in Idaho Falls, Idaho.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Planning the Expansible House: 6 Schemes for Houses That Grow, (Washington, DC: U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency, Office of the Administrator, 1947).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter II discussion on postwar housing solutions for further discussion of this kind of house, page 45.

<sup>4</sup> The phased-in nature of basement house construction will be explained and illustrated in Chapter III.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter III discussion on windows and doors, beginning on page 70.

<sup>6</sup> Both the Skyberg and Fee houses were constructed from purchased full-house plans. See Chapter III.

<sup>7</sup> An article in the Sioux Valley News from August 1950 refers to the price of basement construction as approximately \$900. As it is not known whether this basement was intended to be finished as a basement dwelling, the estimated cost of a basement house's initial construction in the immediate postwar period in Canton, South Dakota could be assumed to be approximately \$1000.

<sup>8</sup> In his introduction to World War II and the American Dream, Donald Albrecht cites the increase in the United States' productive capacity (fifteen percent per year from 1940 to 1944), the sale of war bonds, and the scarcity of consumer goods as factors which allowed American families to amass considerable savings. Donald Albrecht, ed. World War II and the American Dream (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), xx.

<sup>9</sup> "Only Revolution in Method Can Supply the Need," Life (17 December 1945), 34.

<sup>10</sup> William J. Dean, "From Black Asphalt Streets to Amber Waves of Grain," Christian Science Monitor (6 November 1996), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Elder Street is located six blocks north of Fifth Street/Highway 18, which is the main east-west thoroughfare in Canton. Elder borders the Fee property to the North. Esther Fee recalls the activity on Saturday evenings, mostly on account of the dust stirred up by the traffic on the unpaved streets.

<sup>12</sup> The Sioux Valley News reported on the construction of 13 new houses between the spring of 1947 and the summer of 1948, when construction was newsworthy enough to be mentioned consistently. Three basement houses, which were not reported in the paper, were constructed during this time period, amounting to about 19 percent of the new construction in town.

<sup>13</sup> For examples of the basement houses surveyed in Nebraska, see Chapter III and Figures 69-71.

## CHAPTER II

### HOUSING IN THE POSTWAR ERA, 1945-1952

The basement houses in Canton, which were built during the period following the conclusion of World War II, were shaped by the social, economic, and architectural circumstances surrounding their time of construction. This chapter will address the historical context of these buildings, including the early postwar housing shortage and its contributing factors. Many of the architectural trends of the postwar period were developed in direct response to the housing crisis, and the later housing boom was in part a reaction to the hardship that preceded it. The exploration of different materials and approaches to construction probably influenced the initial construction of basement houses by promoting creative solutions to the housing crisis. As the conservative trends of the postwar housing boom are demonstrated in the eventual superstructure of a number of basement houses, these styles will be discussed as well.



### The Post-World War II Housing Shortage

From 1945 until approximately 1949, the years following V-J day and the end of World War II, the United States experienced an unprecedented housing shortage which affected families in cities across the country.

Attributed to a number of historical, economic, and demographic factors, the crisis was widely covered in the press and popular magazines, and resulted in national legislation aimed at housing needy families, including price controls and a system of prioritizing building materials for veterans' housing. Canton, South Dakota was not immune from the crisis, and in fact its rural location may have exacerbated the effects of too few materials and little skilled labor.

### Wartime Demands on Building Materials

One of the major conditions which led to the postwar housing shortage was actually in place long before the end of the war. Building levels were insufficient to fill the need for new residences during the Depression, and continued low pre-war income and employment levels further prevented adequate growth of housing stock.<sup>1</sup> In 1940, the U.S. needed an estimated seven million new non-farm houses.<sup>2</sup> The building industry had just begun to grow again when it was cut short by the declaration of war on Japan and

Germany. The war conversion efforts for the duration of World War II prevented the construction of much-needed residential buildings.

During the war, building materials necessary for residential construction were instead used in the war effort. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and the declaration of war by the U.S. on Japan and Germany, the War Powers Act gave the War Production Board the authority to shut down production of low-priority items and reallocate materials and machines for the war. This legislation and the manufacture of bombs, guns, ships, planes, and tanks<sup>3</sup> resulted in few surplus materials for the production of household goods ranging from thermometers to refrigerators.<sup>4</sup> High priorities for direct defense manufacture made goods such as piping, nails, and insulation scarce and therefore unavailable to builders.<sup>5</sup> A conservation order issued in May, 1942, to preserve supplies of iron and steel further halted production on non-essential products and building projects. Steel and other raw materials were instead prioritized for use in the construction, expansion, or conversion of factories to wartime production.

The initial demand for iron and steel soon impacted the supply of a third widely-used building material—wood. Lumber was suggested as a key substitution material for iron and steel during the early years of the war. “Baseboards, doors, gutters, light poles, and shelving—almost every conceivable metal object or fitting—were to be made of wood.”<sup>6</sup> By mid-1942, however, the U.S., which had always thought of itself as a forest-rich nation,

was facing a timber shortage. As Robert Friedel writes in his essay "Scarcity and Promise,"

. . . the enormous increase in demand not only for building materials but also for crates, planking, and lend-lease supplies coincided with a decline in production. The military draft, along with rapidly expanding employment in industry, caused a shortage of labor in the forests. Added to the difficulties plaguing the economy in transportation and machinery, the timber and wood products industry entered a period of crisis.<sup>7</sup>

What little lumber, steel and other supplies that were available for construction were used to build housing for the large numbers of defense workers who had flooded industrial centers, as a shortage in these situations would impede national defense activities.<sup>8</sup> Friedel considers the wartime needs of factory construction and defense worker housing to be "the most extraordinary architectural emergency in the country's history—combining urgent building needs with scarcity caused by both military requirements and the cutoff of foreign supplies."<sup>9</sup> Although these demands were met during the war through extraordinary building efforts, they resulted in mostly temporary structures and were not without repercussions in the postwar period.



## Factors Contributing to the Housing Shortage

The housing shortage was not unanticipated. As early as 1944, government studies showed that a shortage of materials and skilled labor would result in the nation's housing needs not being met. After the conclusion of World War II, the continued limited supply of materials ranging from lumber to brick to plumbing fixtures and pipe became one of the major contributing factors to the crisis and had repercussions for builders throughout the country (Figure 1, Appendix A). In addition to the manufacturing and defense housing which had consumed necessary building materials and prevented residential construction, by war's end there were more people needing housing than ever. A high marriage rate, attributed to a sense of wartime urgency, possible deferments, and the prosperity of new-found employment,<sup>10</sup> led to a correspondingly high birth rate and millions of new families who wanted and needed new homes. In 1940, the Census Bureau estimated that the number of families in the U.S. would increase from 1940 to 1955 by almost 7,300,000, with the average increase about 485,000 per year.<sup>11</sup> The shortage was compounded by the wartime migration to industrial centers and discharged GIs who often returned to those same urban areas. Although this internal migration was expected to reverse itself somewhat after the war, it resulted in a major permanent population shift to industrial centers, particularly in the West, which was home to vast aircraft

and shipbuilding industries. The population of California, Oregon and Washington increased by nearly forty percent from 1940-1947.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that housing levels were barely sufficient before the outbreak of the war contributed to the postwar crisis. Although New Deal housing projects were implemented during the Depression, mostly to stimulate the building supply industry and provide employment with the added benefit of housing needy people, too few units were constructed to meet the increased wartime demand, and many of the existing houses were severely deteriorated. "Probable Volume of Postwar Construction," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin number 825 published May, 1945, stated that "in 1940 there was a relatively low vacancy ratio, extensive doubling up of families, appreciable occupancy of irregular units, and use of several million unfit dwelling units."<sup>13</sup> The estimated number of vacant, usable housing units was between two-and-a-half and three percent of the nation's housing stock, much less than the 5 percent generally accepted as a necessary 'cushion.'<sup>14</sup>

During the war, residential construction was virtually nonexistent, to the effect that in December, 1945, it was estimated that at least 3,500,000 new homes were needed the following year. Chester Bowles, chief of the wartime Office of Price Administration, believed that it would take until 1950 to meet the housing demand, even if only immediate needs were met.<sup>15</sup>

Stories of the shortage, which seemed especially dramatic immediately after the end of the war, were alarming (Figure 2, Appendix A). An article in Life stated:

Everywhere people desperately sought places to live. In San Francisco a family of four moved into a renovated mortuary and happily called it home. In Omaha a newspaper advertisement read, 'big icebox 7 by 17 feet inside. Could be fixed up to live in.'<sup>16</sup>

Time had similar accounts:

In a single month, more than 32,000 requests for living quarters—apartments, a room, anything—had poured into the Officers Service Committee in Manhattan. But quarters were found for only 2,750 families. . . In Kansas City, the Veteran's Housing Center had 700 applications, could only fill 30. In Portland, Ore., a veteran turned city fireman lived with his wife and child in one room, shared a bathroom with seven other families. In Birmingham, veterans and their families lived in tourist camps, heated baby bottles on automobile radiators.<sup>17</sup>

Stories such as these led to an air of desperation and near-hysteria, which resulted in a threatened march on Washington<sup>18</sup> and a pervading belief that houses would be impossible to buy or build.

Government and industry officials predicted the shortage, even if they did not accurately estimate its extent. However, the continuing demands for war production prevented the industry and federal agencies from doing anything substantial to prevent it. The end of the war occurred much earlier than expected due to the devastation caused by the atomic bombs in Japan and prevented the implementation of a postwar housing plan. "Probable Volume



of Postwar Construction," stated that of the expected average 900,000 new dwellings that were to be completed per year following the end of the war,

... about 250,000. . . will be started during the final year of war against Japan only, although this number will be governed to a considerable degree by the time of year at which Germany is defeated. About 550,000 units are expected to be started in the first year following defeat of Japan, and the number started will probably increase to about 1,040,000 in the fifth year.<sup>19</sup>

The hastened defeat of Japan hindered the construction of the expected 250,000 units, and the U.S. housing situation was that much farther behind when the returning GIs and their families flooded the market.

Bulletin 825 did not present a solution to the anticipated crisis, although such a plan may have existed. Regardless, governmental and industry efforts proved incapable of preventing the shortage, as the contributing factors were so widespread and complex as to be beyond anyone's control. People would have to make the best of it, and in many cases, they did.

### Governmental Measures

The Federal government sought to alleviate the effects of the housing crisis in many ways. Recently discharged GIs and their families were assumed to have been the most affected by the shortage. Of the 3,400,000 non-farm families needing housing in 1946, nearly three million were veterans' families, and two million were predicted to be homeless by year's end.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, legislation was passed to give priorities for available housing and materials to veterans.

In January, 1946, a priorities regulation system was established by the Civilian Production Administration, prioritizing key construction materials for veterans' use and for building projects to be rented or sold to vets. Further restrictions were enacted by the Federal Housing Administration under the Veterans Emergency Housing Program Order No. 1, which was announced in March, 1946, and restricted non-veteran remodeling as well as new construction.<sup>21</sup> The FHA also made remodeling loans available to non-veterans, provided the space was to be used to house GIs and their families.<sup>22</sup>

Fears of inflation prompted the wartime Office of Price Control to address building materials costs. Ironically, the prosperity of wartime production brought a decisive end to the Depression. Although rationing was strict only for gasoline, shoes and some foodstuffs, materials shortages limited goods at the production end, which meant that people had fewer products to buy.<sup>23</sup> Stable incomes provided by the war industries, the military, and support services resulted in remarkably high earnings, and many people acquired substantial savings during the war. The shortage of consumer goods, including building materials, led to skyrocketing prices and the inflation rate in 1946 grew to 18.2 percent.<sup>24</sup> Building and land costs increased approximately 50 percent over prewar levels.<sup>25</sup> The high demand for housing threatened to raise the price of materials far above what the average veteran

could afford. In April, 1946, Housing Expediter Wilson Wyatt put a stop to all 'non-essential' construction and instead directed all building materials towards housing veterans.<sup>26</sup>

The crisis and its effects on veterans and other potential home builders was long-standing. Apparently the enacted legislation was only moderately successful, as by the end of 1946, the situation had not improved considerably. A vigorous debate as to the best way to provide for home construction ensued in the popular press, and a housing version of trickle-down economics was endorsed by many people. An editorial in a December, 1946 issue of the Saturday Evening Post argues that

. . . if those who are able to build houses were permitted to do so, the houses which they vacate would become available to someone else. The veterans themselves are the first to admit that they are usually the least able, and certainly the least willing, to invest their limited funds in land and buildings at highly inflated prices. . . There is one way in which we could really give the veteran a break in this housing situation. Everyone who is so anxious to build that he is willing to take shoddy merchandise at high prices should be encouraged to go ahead and build. Then let the veteran move into the vacated units until his personal plans and the national economy become more settled. Our present veterans'-priority program is but another glaring example of artificial unbalance created by fuzzy-minded Government officials who, in attempting to help the "right people," have failed to provide constructive legislation for anybody.<sup>27</sup>

An article in Better Homes and Gardens published in November, 1946, urged people to bide their time until 1949, when costs would be down and materials



available for home construction. This same article suggests a similar trickle-down theory:

. . . [the] alternative is to remove controls, so that the man who builds a new house is the one who can afford to take a financial loss and charge it off to a higher standard of living. When he builds, he'll leave an older house vacant. That starts a moving-up cycle, which eventually leaves a house the young veteran can afford to buy or rent. A new house is nice, but most Americans have never had one.<sup>28</sup>

The reality of the housing crisis was made more painful due to the expectations for a dream house that GIs and their wives had built up during the war. Hopes for a "dream house," considered central to postwar material comfort,<sup>29</sup> were fueled in part by popular magazines, which devoted pages in nearly every issue to anticipated postwar housing designs and homey advertisements. The U.S. government also had a hand in the promotion of dream houses as morale-boosting propaganda. In Crabgrass Frontier, Kenneth T. Jackson points out that "During the war, government and industry both played up the suburban house to the families of absent serviceman, and between 1941 and 1946 some of the nation's most promising architects published their 'dream houses' in a series in the Ladies' Home Journal."<sup>30</sup> An advertisement for General Electric, included as part of the exhibit "World War II and the American Dream" at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC, shows a GI and his girlfriend dreaming of "that little home sketched there in the sand. . . a symbol of faith and hope and courage."<sup>31</sup> The

ad also suggested saving for a "victory house" by purchasing war bonds (Figure 3, Appendix A).

### Situation in Canton, South Dakota

Canton, by most accounts a typical Midwestern town dependent on agriculture and community services, was typical in its postwar experience as well. Unlike larger industrial centers which attracted war workers, Canton's population grew little in the early 1940s, and at the war's end the town was home to only 2,560 people. Many of the GIs and others who had left Canton to work in the war industries returned after the war, resulting in a small increase in population and a greater demand for housing.

Undoubtedly, people in Canton shared these dreams for a new home of their own. The Sioux Valley News, Canton's local weekly newspaper, showed the kinds of propaganda which fueled these dreams, such as an advertisement for Kroehler Furniture, which showed a couple embracing next to a spacious living room and the headline "When He Comes Home Again" (Figure 4, Appendix A).<sup>32</sup> The paper reflected the sentiment being felt nationwide as it published an article, probably syndicated, entitled "Convalescent GIs Plan Houses for the Time They Return Home."<sup>33</sup> The article told of soldiers, recuperating at a hospital in Florida, who took classes to prepare themselves with the issues of building a home, such as planning,

financing, site selection, water supply, building materials, drainage, wiring, heating, and taxes. The article stated that most of the GIs were from small rural towns, like Canton, and planned on building in their old neighborhoods when they returned home. Furthermore,

. . . these couples insist on large closets and kitchens, fireplaces, plenty of electrical outlets, indirect lighting, quick-freezing units, large single-pane windows, built-in bookshelves, extra bathroom, stationary washtubs, concrete driveways, and enclosed play areas for small children. The average GI intends to spend between \$6,500 and \$8,000 for his house of dreams.<sup>34</sup>

The housing crisis put these long-planned-for dreams far out of reach, for although it had fewer people, Canton's housing problems were no less acute. Perhaps due to the town's rural location, postwar construction in Canton was especially hard-hit by materials shortages. Canton was serviced by a rail line and was within an hour's drive of two regional cities, Sioux Falls, South Dakota and Sioux City, Iowa, but the town's small, family-owned lumber yards and contractors presumably had little pull with materials distributors, and lumber, appliances, and other necessary building materials were slow to arrive.

Little residential construction had taken place in Canton during the Depression or war years, resulting, as elsewhere in the country, in too little available housing. Andrew M. Johnson, editor of the Sioux Valley News, periodically addressed the housing crunch and its effect on the local economy in his column from 1945 through the fall of 1947, evidence of the extent and



longevity of the crisis. Johnson puzzled over Canton's housing crisis in February, 1946:

Shortage of housing continues to be the perplexing mystery of the war and the post-war period. I have yet to find someone who can explain it. Canton and South Dakota have lost residents during the war, as have most other farming communities. Yet the housing situation is ten times worse than it was some five or six years back.<sup>35</sup>

By the following August, the situation remained much the same, as Johnson wrote:

The Canton Chamber of Commerce years ago made a survey of housing conditions in Canton. The late Adolph Bragstad, then secretary, found there were 54 vacant houses here. That is hard to believe in these days of housing shortages, considering that our population has not increased a great deal. But it was true. You probably remember back when you had a choice of from five to ten houses when you looked for one to rent. It may be trite but it certainly is true to say times have changed.<sup>36</sup>

Many of the houses which were available were quite deteriorated. Most of Lincoln County's 3,521 dwelling units were said to need repairs or remodeling, to the estimated tune of more than \$350,000 in the five years following the end of the war.<sup>37</sup>

The reality of the housing shortage in Canton was reflected in the content of the weekly newspaper. A regular postwar column addressed the concerns of the typical GI, and in January, 1946, focused on housing. Entitled "Everyday Problems Confronting a GI-His Family," the article stated:

There is endless validity in the theme, 'there is no place like home.' Ironically, however, thousands of Veterans are returning from the wars to find that no houses are available in which they and their young wives can establish homes. It is difficult to picture a more frustrating and embittering experience for a combat soldier who lived for years in fox-holes, slit trenches, and other cheerless shelters away from home, than the plight of returning to America to find himself unable to buy, build, or rent a home for himself and family. Housing shortages are confronting Veterans in the smaller towns and cities as well as in the big cities.<sup>38</sup>

Johnson's early postwar columns urged people to find spaces which could be made into living quarters, as "housing is the bottle neck that is holding Canton's growth back seriously. We must have more places for people to live or these people can't move here."<sup>39</sup> The editor's column dated March 28, 1946 again linked adequate housing to economic prosperity:

The town that is doing nothing about housing is the town that will be sitting in second place when this thing clears up. Today there is a surplus of labor in many cities. . . Someone said unemployment in Duluth is as bad as it ever was during the depression. Why? Housing's a large share of the answer. . . Consequently, the town which provides housing in some way, even temporarily, is the town that will forge ahead.<sup>40</sup>

Several months later, housing was still an issue for prospective employers, as stated in an article dated July 4:

'Sure, I'll take the job, but you'll have to find me a place to live.' That's the answer practically any businessman in Canton gets these days when he tries to hire additional help. That's the answer C.C. Jacobson is getting from prospective school teachers. He has three signed up on contract to teach here this fall, but if housing cannot be found they'll break their contracts. Several others are ready to sign up, but they must have housing first.<sup>41</sup>

Notices on continuing materials shortages were occasionally printed in the newspaper. A headline on March 21, 1946 stated "Lumber and Coal—There Isn't Much Choice of Either But Local Dealers Have Had Some."<sup>42</sup> Progress on the first postwar house constructed in Canton was reported periodically in the newspaper. In early March, 1946, construction was said to have been slowed by the unavailability of materials.<sup>43</sup>

Additional articles in the Sioux Valley News demonstrated the extent and longevity of the crisis in Canton. A front-page article dated January 10, 1946 told of two young couples who had purchased trailer homes for use as temporary housing while the men attended South Dakota State College in Brookings (Figure 5, Appendix A). The article begins, "Modern man has become very ingenious and in these days of very critical housing shortage he finds it quite necessary."<sup>44</sup> The shortage was still critical a year and a half later, when a brief article and photographs showed an old farm building being recycled for use as a house, the construction of a prefabricated house, and the division of one house into two separate livable units.<sup>45</sup> Two couples purchased a surplus army barracks building in Sioux Falls and arranged to cut it in two and set it on two neighboring lots.<sup>46</sup> Photographs published in May, 1948 show the men and their wives laying the foundations for the barracks, with the headline "Where There's a Will There Is Usually a Way for the Determined" (Figure 6, Appendix A).<sup>47</sup>



As these examples demonstrate, the housing crisis demanded that people adopt unusual, and in many cases innovative, solutions for shelter. Canton, as a small, rural Midwestern town, faced the housing shortage as did other towns and cities across the nation—with patience, temerity, and creativity. Together with the recycled barracks, remodeled outbuildings, and prefabricated houses, there arose another solution—the basement house.

### Postwar Residential Architecture

The demands of the postwar housing crisis resulted in a number of innovative house designs, the development and use of new materials, and altogether new styles of residential design. Many of the earliest postwar houses were built only as temporary solutions and were designed to have limited life spans, yet the designs, materials, and styles have since proven their permanence. This section will illustrate the wide range of postwar residential design, including the rise of prefabrication, temporary solutions to the shortage, and the emergence of the ranch style as a means of establishing the significance of the basement house.

### Residential Design: Modern and Traditional

Before the extent of the postwar housing crisis was fully realized, the building professions and the concerned public were embroiled in a vigorous debate over the character of the postwar house. Architects seemed to advocate modern designs, new materials, and innovative appliances which would make homemaking easier and stimulate postwar family life. Magazines such as the Architectural Forum, Architectural Record and Pencil Points published plans, photographs, and editorials suggesting the incorporation of such design features as window walls, flat roofs, outdoor rooms, and the gamut of modern appliances (Figure 7, Appendix A).

However, this thoroughly modern design did not find a wide audience with the consumer public. Avi Friedman points out the tremendous potential available in postwar construction prompted builders and organizations to monitor consumer preferences in regards to home design and construction.<sup>48</sup> Large-circulation magazines such as Better Homes and Gardens and McCall's conducted comprehensive surveys to find out what people wanted in a postwar house.<sup>49</sup> To the dismay of the architecture profession, most people did not embrace the concept of a glass-walled, flat-roofed modernist structure, although one survey respondent felt "that this type of compact, streamlined house is designed 'special' for new war couples

like us. . . economical, built of fresh ideas, . . . a forward step in keeping with our demand for a brand new life in a brand new world."<sup>50</sup>

Instead, the traditional forms of the Cape Cod cottage and the assumed 'Western' ranch house were favored among the general public and emerged as the most popular housing types of the postwar period.<sup>51</sup> The Cape Cod, disdained by much of the architecture community who saw it as a "true child of the depression" which "never really lost its pinched, poor man's look,"<sup>52</sup> had nonetheless come to symbolize 'home' during the 1930s and '40s.<sup>53</sup> This style was characterized as one or one-and-a-half stories, with a steeply-pitched gable roof parallel to the street and a symmetrical facade (Figure 8, Appendix A), but the term was interpreted loosely. Walter Adams called it "just about anything painted white with low eave lines and shutters that won't shut and hard-to-wash many-paned windows and the perfume of lilacs and of red roses blooming at the door,"<sup>54</sup> which was not an inaccurate perception. The Cape Cod could be worked over to have the functional requirements most postwar families desired within a traditional form, as advocated by architect Royal Barry Wills who is noted for his small house designs.<sup>55</sup>

The ranch house style was more modern than the Cape Cod in both exterior and interior forms. Although not quite as avant-garde as the flat-roofed style embraced by modernist architects, the popularized version of the ranch house embraced modern concepts such as a one-story, open plan, plate glass windows, and an attached garage (Figure 9, Appendix A). Hardly typical



of the ranch houses of the Southwest, from which it was supposedly derived, the ranch house was often further characterized by the Colonial-inspired details, much like those used on the traditional Cape Cod, such as wrought iron railings, applied shutters, and the use of both brick and wooden shingles as cladding materials.

To a certain extent, the raging debate over the merits of Cape Cod cottages and modernist houses was a moot point. The housing shortage rendered both houses difficult to obtain, and in most cases, too expensive in materials and labor for most middle-class families to afford. Although the eventual housing boom kept the debate and consequent consumer preference surveys from being an exercise in futility, the immediate postwar years saw the adaptation of the popular forms through the use of new materials and construction methods, as well as the utilization of altogether unusual housing forms. The result was a much wider variety of housing forms than had been predicted by the debate over modern versus traditional residential design.

### The Popularity of Prefabrication

In light of the housing crisis, some architects and designers re-thought the notion of a house. Buckminster Fuller unveiled an updated version of his 1927 Dymaxion House, now called the "Dymaxion Dwelling Machine," in

1945. A round aluminum structure 36 feet in diameter and supported by cables which radiated from a center mast, the 'house' was to be manufactured by the Beech Aircraft Corporation in Wichita, Kansas, and was Fuller's solution to the housing crisis (Figure 10, Appendix A). In Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow, Michael J. Auer writes: "As always, Fuller had ideas. The nation had a housing shortage of immense proportions. He had a house that could be mass-produced in immense quantities. With the war almost over, the nation had excess aircraft-producing capacity. He had a house that could be built in an aircraft factory."<sup>56</sup> The interior consisted of four wedge-shaped rooms, two baths, kitchen with the most up-to-date appliances, a continuous band of Plexiglas windows, plywood flooring, and extras such as revolving closets and shelves,<sup>57</sup> and a stainless steel fireplace (Figure 11, Appendix A).<sup>58</sup> At 1,017 square feet and with the high domed ceiling, the house offered 50 percent more living space than a conventional house of the same price—\$6,500.<sup>59</sup> Despite a favorable response from the public—thousands of people came to see the prototype house in Wichita and 37,000 unsolicited orders were placed, many accompanied by checks—plans to produce approximately 50,000 houses in the first year of manufacture were never realized.<sup>60</sup>

The Lustron house was another prefabricated, factory-produced answer to the housing shortage. Ironically, production delays caused it to miss the urgency of the postwar crisis—production did not start in earnest until 1948—and high manufacturing, distributing, and labor costs hastened the demise of

the promising company. Manufactured completely of enamel-coated steel panels and steel studs at the former Curtiss-Wright fighter plane factory in Columbus, Ohio, the company was supported through loans and guarantees by the federal government and its designs were praised by the architectural press.<sup>61</sup> The Lustron house was a one-story, gable-roofed building in a pared-down ranch idiom (Figure 12, Appendix A). The 32 x 36 feet house on a concrete slab foundation amounted to about 1,000 square feet and contained five rooms in an open plan (Figures 13-14, Appendix A). Eventually a three-bedroom plan and a luxury model with fireplace and attached garage were produced. Significantly more houses were produced than Fuller's one prototypical Dymaxion Dwelling Machine, although the Lustron corporation also never realized its full potential. By 1950, when the company filed for bankruptcy, it had produced and sold only a couple thousand houses, far short of its goal of 17,000 per year.<sup>62</sup>

Fuller's Dymaxion Dwelling Machine and the Lustron all-steel house represent two examples of the total industrialization of the house manufacturing process.<sup>63</sup> More typical of the prefabrication trend which occurred during the postwar period was the partial factory production of a building in the form of panels, doors, windows, and other individual items. Although building elements had been produced in factories for decades, the prefab industry was jump-started during World War II when one-fifth of the war housing built by the government was prefabricated. During that time, the



number of substantial producers in the U.S. grew from a dozen to 80.<sup>64</sup> The postwar era, due in part to the housing crisis and the rising need for affordable housing, saw prefabricated methods of construction being embraced in earnest. In 1947, more than 280 firms were involved in the production of prefabricated houses.<sup>65</sup>

These companies employed a variety of fabrication and distribution methods. Most models utilized some sort of panel construction system which was manufactured on an assembly line in a factory and fitted together and erected on site. Panels could be 4 x 8 feet and constructed of standard wood-stud and sheathing, as was the case with American Houses models, or built as the true dimensions of the finished wall. Metal framing systems were also used, as were stressed-skin plywood or metal panels. Houses could boast their prefabricated nature by exposing the exterior seams where the panels were joined, or be clad with shingles or siding on-site, thereby masking their origins and appearing identical to a conventionally-built house (Figure 15, Appendix A). Regardless of the finished product, all prefabricated houses used what was considered at the time truly modern machinery, materials, and construction methods.

Although prefabricated houses were widely promoted and publicized and the industry had high hopes for prefabs as the antidote to the housing crisis, the conversion of factories, materials shortages, and manufacturing delays prevented prefabs from having much impact on the immediate

postwar housing crisis. Instead, trends in remodeling and renovation took precedence as families desperately sought anything with a roof as shelter.

### Rehabilitation and the Housing Crisis

Many types of buildings were rehabilitated for use as housing during the housing crisis. Surplus military housing was readily available and became a popular temporary solution. Quonset huts, the corrugated metal-clad semicircular buildings of which 170,000 were made and shipped overseas during the war, were rehabilitated to house many families (Figure 16, Appendix A). The Navy released 5,000 huts as surplus in 1946 and sold them to universities, municipalities and other non-profit organizations. The buildings were 20 x 48 feet, completely lined, insulated and floored, and could be divided into two apartments, each with two bedrooms, a living room, small kitchen, and shower bath.<sup>66</sup> Surplus thirty-man barracks could also be divided into three two-bedroom apartments, but as they were not designed to be demountable, they were first sawn apart and reassembled at a new site. A third of the 35,000 auto trailers purchased by the Federal Public Housing Agency for its war housing program were redistributed as temporary homes. Barracks and war-worker housing, much of which extended its usefulness until well after the housing crisis was alleviated, were intended for temporary use only, and were built with only one-tenth of the framing lumber of

normal buildings, without gutters or downspouts, and with shower stalls rather than bathtubs.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to the rehabilitation of surplus barracks and Quonset huts, unused outbuildings, garages, and commercial buildings were rehabilitated as housing. Popular magazines including The American Home and Better Homes and Gardens gave remodeling and decorating tips to stretch small spaces.<sup>68</sup>

### Use of Alternative Materials

Since the shortage of lumber had the greatest impact on the construction of traditional wood-framed houses, the use of alternative materials was explored and advocated during the postwar housing crisis. In addition to the aluminum and steel used in the factory-produced houses mentioned earlier, other more traditional but less common building materials were used.

Concrete was one such material. An article in Better Homes and Gardens pointed out that "bricks are scarce, but cement is available. Wood siding is even scarcer. But sand and water are abundant. Combine cement, sand, and water in the proper amounts and in the correct manner, and you have concrete blocks,"<sup>69</sup> which were sufficient for the external structure and surfacing of a house.



Rammed earth, a centuries-old construction method employing a mixture of clay, sand, and water which is tamped into a wooden frame was also promoted as an affordable alternative to the materials and housing shortage. An article in The Rotarian pointed out, "shortages may plague the builders of conventional structures, but the material for rammed-earth buildings is not hard to find. Just dig under your feet and watch that modern, attractive, inexpensive, fire-proof, durable house or public building rise from the earth!"<sup>70</sup> Both concrete block and rammed earth were especially appropriate for timber-poor areas such as the Midwest plains, and in fact the two chief promoters of rammed earth construction were professors at South Dakota State University and Oklahoma State University.<sup>71</sup>

### The "Expansible" House

Many families with foresight built "expansible" houses, the designs of which were developed, tested, and advocated by the Federal government and research institutions across the country.<sup>72</sup> The U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency published a postwar booklet entitled Planning the Expansible House, which presented six schemes for houses that would grow with the family (Figures 17-18, Appendix A).<sup>73</sup> The booklet begins:

Many veterans, while still in service, planned the dream house they would build on their return to civilian life. but, when they came back, they found that the high cost of living

soon drained away their savings, and that the price of houses had increased far beyond their means. Plans for spacious living had to be discarded for almost anything that would serve as shelter. . . . As one alternative, attention has been focused on a one-bedroom house, complete and adequate for a small family, designed, planned, and built to grow with the family—an Expansible House. The idea is not new. Early houses throughout New England were built section by section and wing by wing. In its modern version, the Cape Cod cottage with an unfinished attic is familiar to most of us. And the Rambler, a freely extensible house that developed in the spacious West and Middle West, has become a recognized architectural form.<sup>74</sup>

The American Home also published a series of first-hand accounts of expansible type houses and building plans. Several examples of “step-at-a-time building of the ideal-to-be” were reported, as encouragement and possible solutions for “those determined young couples who must again put aside their hopes and dreams and find some sensible, practical solution for a home now.”<sup>75</sup> Included in this series was an article on two basement houses in Utah (Figures 19-20, Appendix A). Entitled “Pay-As-You-Go Has Long been a Practice in Utah!” the article stated “many Utah citizens begin their house by constructing a foundation only. Upon this they place a roof and here they live until they can afford to build another story.” Although not included in other publications on “expansible houses,” basement houses were a viable and common architectural solution to the housing crisis, as will be described in the following chapter.

This range of alternative, temporary housing shows the ingenious ways people sought to make the best of a bad situation. Although less

publicized than other examples of crisis-borne residential architecture, the basement house fits squarely within this context.

### Early Postwar Residential Architecture in Canton

In Canton, a representative number of these types of housing solutions were utilized in the postwar period. One of the earliest alternative housing types mentioned in the Sioux Valley News was the trailer home, of which two units were purchased by Canton couples to live in while the men attended South Dakota State University in Brookings under the GI Bill (see Figure 5, Appendix A). The newspaper reported very favorably on the character of the trailers, boasting of their "bird's eye maple" interior finishes, spaciousness, and heating system.<sup>76</sup> Space-saving features such as a foldable dining table, collapsible chairs, a dresser which opens up to reveal the wash basin, and "drawer space galore," were also mentioned as amenities, perhaps to convince other readers of the trailers' practicality and comfort. A month and a half later, editor Johnson urged Canton to purchase additional trailer homes to alleviate the housing crisis. He wrote:

Several towns the size of Canton have taken advantage of the government's supply of trailer houses to ease their housing shortages. I call special attention. . . to. . . what Rock Rapids, Ia., has done in this regard. By providing 15 trailer houses for rent to veterans, they are temporarily easing the housing shortage which besets all towns of our size and cities, too. The plan is well worth our city council's consideration and prompt action. The



government provides the trailer houses at a pittance for cost. The costs will come from transporting the equipment and preparing it for use. It will mean some work of planning and completing arrangements for the city council. Several of the towns having already gone through the plan would provide an abundance of information and advice to the council. The program is temporary in nature, of course. It should be a help in the coming two years, however. Building new homes is the only permanent answer, but that will be slow. So let's look over this problem and act upon it promptly.<sup>77</sup>

Prefabricated houses were also embraced by the Canton community as solutions to the housing shortage. In mid-March, 1946, the newspaper reported that orders for round-roofed prefabricated houses, which looked much like Quonset huts, had been placed by several Canton residents. The houses were to be 20 feet wide by 24-36 feet long, could be purchased with double doors at the end for later use as a garage, and could be set on concrete slabs or over a full basement. The local merchant for the houses, whose name was not mentioned, promised that the houses could be set up at the rate of one a day, although delivery dates had not been promised the buyers at the time the article was written.<sup>78</sup>

Prefabrication had its skeptics in Canton. An article about the continued lumber and coal shortages stated that

. . . local lumber dealers here are not sure of the prefabricated housing future in a locality such as Canton. While they are investigating the possibilities and may provide for such demands as there are, they feel that individual preferences may make many prospective home owners unwilling to build a home 'just like the Jones' next door.'<sup>79</sup>

Traditionally styled prefabricated houses seemed to have found a market in Canton, though. In August, 1947, the Sioux Valley News reported that three prefabs were under construction, one on North Kimball and two on North Dakota, owned by Mr. and Mrs. A.B. Engen, John Shaff and Sam Husby, respectively. Several years later, long past the urgency of the postwar housing crisis and into the ensuing construction boom, the Sioux Valley News published an article and accompanying photo of another prefabricated house under construction. The article began,

Probably a forerunner of the day when you can order a house like a bag of groceries and have it delivered at your convenience is this complete half-house pictured as it was being placed on its foundation in the 500 block on East First street last Friday. The next day the other half of the house was moved into place, bolted to the rear half shown here, and Leo P. Konietzko was just about ready to move in.<sup>80</sup>

A number of postwar rehabilitation projects were also mentioned in the Sioux Valley News. Under the headline "Three Ways to Beat the Housing Shortage," the newspaper ran photographs of two buildings which were being converted to housing (Figure 21, Appendix A).<sup>81</sup> One was an early (1878) farmhouse which had been used as an outbuilding for many years, which was purchased by Olaf Johnson and set over a foundation in town. The other example was of an older house which had been cut in half, top and bottom, and sold to two different people for rehabilitation as single family houses. The third photograph showed the Engen house, a prefab which was being constructed on North Kimball.

Throughout the postwar years, advertisements in the Canton paper illustrated the ongoing debate over traditional versus modern houses. Beginning in April, 1946, the paper occasionally printed basic home plans provided by the Monthly Small House Club and other organizations. "The Quincy," the first design published in the paper, was a one-story, two-bedroom Cape Cod example (Figure 22, Appendix A).<sup>82</sup> Later designs included "The Taft," a traditionally styled two-story, three-bedroom house with dormer windows, attached garage, and covered front porch (Figure 23, Appendix A),<sup>83</sup> "The Aberdeen," another Cape Cod style house with attached garage and breezeway (Figure 24, Appendix A),<sup>84</sup> and "The Calvin," a 2-bedroom Cape Cod. The ranch house style was illustrated in two other house plans published in 1950, "The Braddock," a one-story house with two bedrooms and an attached garage, and an unnamed plan, which had two bedrooms, a family room and a semi-detached garage (Figures 25-26, Appendix A).<sup>85</sup> The Aberdeen, the Braddock, and the last ranch house example demonstrated the growing prosperity and end of the housing shortage through accompanying advertisements by local lumber dealers, which stated "Let Us Furnish the Materials" and "Make Your Building Dream a Reality!"<sup>86</sup> Although no Modernist style homes were constructed in Canton during the postwar era, the ranch style became quite popular, and a number of examples were built beginning in the early 1950s.



The story of postwar construction in Canton can be traced through the Sioux Valley News. As was typical of a small town which had suffered seriously from the housing shortage, any kind of building was newsworthy. Beginning in December 1948, the paper often published information on building permit applications. However, as the building permit records have since been destroyed, it is difficult to ascertain how accurately the newspaper accounts of local construction reflect the true volume of construction.

Surprisingly, very little mention is made of the many basement houses which were constructed during the postwar period. An article about building permit applications stated that "a permit for a basement was granted to John Van Laar who said it will be some time before he will finish the structure."<sup>87</sup> However, it is certain that a significant number of basement houses were constructed in Canton during the postwar period, and were, in fact, the most popular innovative local solution to the housing shortage.<sup>88</sup>

The basement house fits squarely within the innovative designs, use of new materials, and pervading conservative trends characteristic of postwar residential design. As a reaction to the housing crisis, the basement shares the stage with many other lasting and temporary design solutions. In both its phases of construction, the basement house incorporates the use of materials which were developed, or gained popularity, during the war years. The eventual superstructure construction of many basement houses mirrors the

postwar debate over traditional styles, modernism, and a compromise, the ranch house.

SOUTHWORTH  
FOUR STAR POND  
25% COTTON FIBER

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chester Bowles, "4,000,000 Families Want to Build or Buy," New York Times Magazine, 11 November 1945, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Albrecht, ed., World War II and the American Dream (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Friedel, "Scarcity and Promise," in World War II and the American Dream, ed. Donald Albrecht, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Friedel, 55.

<sup>6</sup> Friedel, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Friedel, 70.

<sup>8</sup> Friedel, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Friedel, 56.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, and William M. Tuttle, Jr., A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, Third Edition, Volume II: Since 1865 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 806.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Probable Volume of Postwar Construction, Bulletin No. 825 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 1945), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Albrecht, xxii.

<sup>13</sup> Probable Volume of Postwar Construction, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Probable Volume of Postwar Construction, 17.



<sup>15</sup> Bowles, 40.

<sup>16</sup> "The Great Housing Shortage," Life, 17 December 1945, 27.

<sup>17</sup> "No Place Called Home," Time, 22 October 1945, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Probable Volume of Postwar Construction, 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Bowles, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Mort Reed, Jr., "Can I Build or Must I Wait?," Better Homes and Gardens, June 1946, 111.

<sup>22</sup> "Bigger, Easier Loans for Remodeling," Better Homes and Gardens, May 1946, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Friedel, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Norton and others, 833.

<sup>25</sup> "For Veterans: Bad Housing at High Cost?" The Saturday Evening Post, 7 December 1946, 184.

<sup>26</sup> "Housing: For Veterans Only," Time, 8 April 1946, 22.

<sup>27</sup> "For Veterans: Bad Housing at High Cost?," 184.

<sup>28</sup> Bob Jones, "What's Ahead in Building Costs?," Better Homes and Gardens, November 1946, 137.

<sup>29</sup> Albrecht, xx.

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 232.

<sup>31</sup> Albrecht, xxi.

<sup>32</sup> (advertisement) Sioux Valley News, 11 October 1945, 3A.

<sup>33</sup> "Convalescent GIs Plan Houses for the Time They Return Home," Sioux Valley News, 15 November 1945, 4B.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew M. Johnson, "The Editor Speaks His Piece: Housing Mystery," Sioux Valley News, 7 February 1946, 2B.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew M. Johnson, "The Editor Speaks His Piece: Quite a Change," Sioux Valley News, 1 August 1946, 8.

<sup>37</sup> "Home Repair Job is Big in County Experts Predict," Sioux Valley News, 3 January 1946, 7A.

<sup>38</sup> "Everyday Problems Confronting a GI-His Family," Sioux Valley News, 10 January 1946, 3B.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew M. Johnson, "The Editor Speaks His Piece: Some Will Go Ahead," Sioux Valley News, 28 March 1946, 2B.

<sup>41</sup> "Hard to Find: Housing Tough on Employers," Sioux Valley News, 4 July 1946, 1A.

<sup>42</sup> "Lumber and Coal-There Isn't Much Choice of Either but Local Dealers Have Had Some," Sioux Valley News, 21 March 1946, 1A.

<sup>43</sup> "One Home Goes Up-Material Delay Slows Building," Sioux Valley News, 7 March 1946, 1A.

<sup>44</sup> "Two Families Beat the Housing Shortage," Sioux Valley News, 10 January 1946, 1A.

<sup>45</sup> "Three Ways to Beat the Housing Shortage," Sioux Valley News, 5 June 1947, 6.

<sup>46</sup> "Building Time Has Come Again: New Homes, Business Improvements Start," Sioux Valley News, 6 May 1948, 3A.

<sup>47</sup> "Where There's a Will There Is Usually a Way for the Determined," Sioux Valley News, 20 May 1948, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Avi Friedman, "The Evolution of Design Characteristics during the Post-Second World War Housing Boom: the U.S. Experience," Journal of Design History 8 (1995): 132.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Adams, "What America Wants to Build," Better Homes and Gardens, June 1946, 23.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Davis Gillies, "Mr. and Mrs. McCall Know What They Want," The Architectural Forum, April 1945, 102.

<sup>51</sup> Friedman, 132.

<sup>52</sup> "Planning the Postwar House," The Architectural Forum, January 1944, 77.

<sup>53</sup> Friedman, 132.

<sup>54</sup> Adams, 23.

<sup>55</sup> See Gillies, 102-103 and "Cape Cod but Not a Cottage," Architectural Record, January 1945, 88-89.

<sup>56</sup> Michael J. Auer, "The Dymaxion Dwelling Machine," in Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow, ed. H. Ward Jandl (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1991), 90.

<sup>57</sup> "Fuller House," Life, 1 April 1946, 73.

<sup>58</sup> Auer, 95.

<sup>59</sup> Auer, 96. \$6,500 was about the price of a Cadillac in 1947.

<sup>60</sup> Auer writes that the standard explanation for the demise of the company was that money for full-scale production was not forthcoming, but this excuse raises more questions than it answers. Fuller was accused of revising his plans until the financiers ran out of patience, but also thought that to make money on the production, as the executives had proposed, was against his ideals, which were as much social as architectural. See Auer, 96.

<sup>61</sup> Tom Wolfe and Leonard Garfield in Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman, eds., Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, III (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 51.



<sup>62</sup> See also Jandl, Chapter 12 "Lustron: the All-Metal Dream House."

<sup>63</sup> Wolfe and Garfield, 51.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Lasch, "What to Look for in Prefabs," Popular Science, August 1946, 67.

<sup>65</sup> Wolfe and Garfield, 51.

<sup>66</sup> Hartley E. Howe, "Stop Gap Housing," Popular Science, March 1946, 67.

<sup>67</sup> Howe, 68.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, "What if You Must Live in a Garage?" Better Homes and Gardens, March 1946, 38.

<sup>69</sup> John Normile, "House With a Built-In Garage," Better Homes and Gardens, October 1946, 45.

<sup>70</sup> Gina Allen, "Why Not Rammed Earth?" The Rotarian, August 1946, 41.

<sup>71</sup> John Edward Kirham wrote "How to Build Your Own Home of Earth" published by the Engineering Experiment Station of Oklahoma A. and M. University. Ralph L. Patty was the author of several rammed-earth guides published by the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station in Brookings. The Agricultural Heritage Museum at South Dakota State University has a substantial amount of information about his research and experiments in their archives.

<sup>72</sup> See Planning the Expansible House, "Residential Space Use Tested in Expandable House at Illinois," Architectural Record (February 1952), 18. Other related publications listed in the Government Printing Office catalog include Expansible Farmhouses, published by the Department of Agriculture in April, 1951.

<sup>73</sup> Planning the Expansible House, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> "Half a Loaf is Better Than None," American Home, July 1946, 19.

<sup>76</sup> "Two Families Beat the Housing Shortage."

<sup>77</sup> Andrew M. Johnson, "The Editor Speaks His Piece: Housing Relief," Sioux Valley News, 28 February 1946, 2B.

<sup>78</sup> "New Pre-Fabricated Homes May Help Solve Housing Shortage in Canton," Sioux Valley News, 14 March 1946, 1A.

<sup>79</sup> "Lumber and Coal—There Isn't Much Choice of Either. . ."

<sup>80</sup> "One-Half House, Complete," Sioux Valley News, 8 February 1951, 1A.

<sup>81</sup> "Three Ways to Beat the Housing Shortage," Sioux Valley News.

<sup>82</sup> "The Quincy" (advertisement), Sioux Valley News, 4 April 1946, 3A.

<sup>83</sup> "The Taft" (advertisement), Sioux Valley News, 9 May 1946, 3A.

<sup>84</sup> "The Aberdeen" (advertisement), Sioux Valley News, 23 February 1950, 8B.

<sup>85</sup> See advertisements in the Sioux Valley News, 23 March 1950, 5B; 24 Aug. 1950, 4B.

<sup>86</sup> See advertisements in the Sioux Valley News, 23 Feb. 1950, 8B; 23 March 1950, 5B.

<sup>87</sup> "Ten Building Permits Granted," Sioux Valley News, 20 April 1950, 1A.

<sup>88</sup> In Canton during the postwar period, two houses were formed from surplus barracks, one barracks building was kept intact to provide three apartments, and only a few prefabricated houses were constructed. In contrast, eight basement houses were built in Canton before 1952.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BASEMENT HOUSE

Basement houses typify the architectural and historical trends which influenced the design of houses after World War II. Both temporary and permanent in construction, both modern and traditional in style and materials, they sum up the variety of early postwar residential architecture in one small package.

The nine basement houses which exist in Canton, South Dakota illustrate not only the architectural styles and impulses of the postwar period, but also the historical events of the local and national postwar housing crisis. This chapter will further explain the basement house trend, using the examples in Canton as case studies.

#### Basement Houses in Canton

Despite the fact that there was little written about basement houses at their time of construction, either in the architectural and popular press or the local newspaper, this method of construction was common in Canton during



the decade following World War II. There are known to be nine extant basement houses in the Canton area (Figures 27-35, Appendix A). Eight of these houses are located within the town limits, and were built between 1947 and 1954. The ninth house is located approximately five miles northwest of Canton, along South Dakota Highway 11, and was constructed in 1952, with the above-ground stories completed in 1954.

The eight in-town examples, their construction dates,<sup>1</sup> and original owners are: 425 North Kidder (Vernon and Lois Skyberg), 1948/1952; 621 North Dakota (Thomas and Esther Fee), 1948; 807 East Fourth (possibly Tom and Fanny Baker), c. 1950/1955; 809 East Fourth (Sigurd and Nona Tokle), c. 1950/1953; 222 North Cedar, (John Van Laar), 1950/1960; 221 South Johnson (Robert Kappen), c. 1947/1955; 209 North Wicker (Raymond and Lois Reinke), 1951/1954; 211 North Wicker (Christopher Fostvedt), 1951/1953. Of these examples, the Skyberg, Fee, Van Laar, and Rikansrud houses are remarkably intact and accurately illustrate the character and history of basement houses in Canton. Furthermore, Lois Fitzer (formerly Skyberg), Esther Fee, and Olive Rikansrud were available to speak about the history and construction of their houses. The remaining examples in Canton also have contributed to an understanding of basement house construction, through their form, materials, and history, and will therefore be included in the following discussion of basement houses in Canton.

### Circumstances of Construction

The postwar housing shortage, which hit Canton remarkably hard, shaped the design and construction of the basement house. At least two of the basement houses in Canton, the Skyberg and Fee houses, were built in direct reaction to the local severity of the national housing shortage. Begun in 1947 and 1948, respectively, these two houses best illustrate the history of this architectural trend.

Vernon and Lois Skyberg were the kind of young couple towards which housing magazines aimed their advertisements and feature articles about "dream homes." The couple met during World War II at Wright Field in Ohio, where Vern was stationed and Lois was employed as a Civil Service clerk. They were married in March, 1946, and made their home in Canton.

The area's housing shortage thwarted the couple's plans for a home of their own and forced the Skybergs to rent a few rooms from another couple in town. Lois Fitzer (Vernon Skyberg died in 1954 and Lois remarried) recalled that "we were living in some bedrooms of a local house, and sharing their refrigerator and bathroom. . . we were eager to get a place of our own. . . And there wasn't much available, because there hadn't been building during the war. There was a real housing crunch."<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after they were married, the Skybergs selected house plans from a publication which Fitzer remembers as "Small Homes Guide," and planned

to build.<sup>3</sup> They chose a "1-1/2 story masonry veneer and frame residence" designed by Maurice Thornton, an architect in Indianapolis.<sup>4</sup> They decided to begin with only the basement to keep from going too much into debt.<sup>5</sup> Fitzer said, "I think we had seen some [basement houses] in Sioux Falls. I don't think we'd ever been in them, we just found this plan we liked, and saw how we could work out [sic] to make a living quarters out of the basement, and we did."<sup>6</sup> The Skybergs purchased their lot on the corner of North Kidder and First Street in July, 1947, as was reported by the Sioux Valley News,<sup>7</sup> and began construction shortly thereafter, finishing the basement in time to welcome the birth of their first child in December of 1948. The above-ground stories were begun during the summer of 1951 while the Skybergs continued to live downstairs, and the family moved from the basement portion of the house to the upstairs in the spring of 1952.

Tom and Esther Fee represented another spectrum of war couples, those who migrated to industrial centers to work in the war industries. During the war, the Fees lived in San Leandro, California. Tom, who was a welder, was employed in the shipyards in nearby Alameda. Although the family was content in California, with a new house and their three sons settled in school, they returned home to Canton in 1946, ostensibly so Tom could help on his family's farm. However, the farming situation was not as ideal as they would have liked, and Tom remained employed as a welder and heavy mechanic, commuting to Sioux Falls for much of his career.



The Fees moved back into town at the height of the housing shortage and, like the Skybergs, were forced to rent for a while. Their apartment was not very comfortable for a family of five, so in 1948 they began building their basement house. The Fees had noticed the Skyberg basement house, which had been completed in the spring of 1948, and decided "if Vern Skyberg could live in a basement house, we could too."<sup>8</sup> The Fees had also seen and visited the interiors of several other basement houses in Sioux Falls, including one owned by Esther's sister-in-law, which influenced the design of their house.

Construction on the Fee basement house was begun shortly after the couple purchased the lot in May, 1948, and the family moved into the house in September of that year. The Fees had purchased full house plans for a one-and-one-half story, two bedroom house through the Garlinghouse Plan Service (plan #4750) of Topeka, Kansas, shortly after they returned to Canton (Figures 36-37, Appendix A). Like the Skybergs, they saw how they could make the basement livable before completing the superstructure, and aimed to do just that. However, the Fees never seemed to have the money or the time to build upwards, and the house has remained intact as a basement.

Little is known about the basement house at 221 South Johnson, the next to be built in Canton. The property was owned by Myrtle and Bernhard Tuntland, the local sheriff, beginning in January, 1949. The Sundling family rented the basement house from the Tuntlands beginning from that time until 1951. Considering that the long winter shortens the construction season

considerably in South Dakota, the basement house must have been excavated and built prior to the winter of 1948-1949. Robert Kappen owned the property from 1931-1949, and Esther Fee remembers that Kappen built the basement house as a residence for himself and his wife during 1947.<sup>9</sup>

Four basement houses in Canton were built as neighbors. The two on East Fourth Street (807 and 809 East Fourth) were built for Tom and Fanny Baker<sup>10</sup> and Sig and Nona Tokle, respectively, and were nearly identical for their duration as basement houses. Two more neighboring basement houses were constructed on the opposite (west) side of town at 209 and 211 North Wicker, owned by Raymond and Lois Reinke and Christopher Fostvedt. These two houses were presumably identical in appearance during their basement phase as well.

It is not known for certain whether the two pairs of neighboring basement houses were constructed by the same builder and/or at the same time. The Reinkes purchased the property at 209 North Wicker in June, 1951, and probably built the basement house that summer. Fostvedt purchased the neighboring property to the north in August, 1951, and it is possible that he may have had time to excavate the basement and complete the enclosure of the structure before winter. However, it is equally likely that Fostvedt waited until the following spring to begin construction on his basement house. The neighboring basement houses on East Fourth were probably not constructed simultaneously. Sig and Nona Tokle purchased property at 809 East Fourth in

April, 1949, and most likely built the basement house that summer. The Sioux Valley News reported in November, 1950, that Sig Tokle had applied for a building permit to build a garage, presumably after the basement had been made livable.<sup>11</sup> The property at 807 East Fourth changed hands frequently until March, 1950, when it was purchased by the Bakers. They are presumed to be the original owners of the basement house, although it is possible that the house could have been quickly constructed during a previous ownership.

The construction of the basement house at 222 North Cedar was the only one documented through mention in the Sioux Valley News. In April, 1950, an article in the paper stated that "the permit for a basement was granted John Van Laar who said it would be some time before he will finish the structure."<sup>12</sup> Van Laar had earlier constructed a full house for his daughter and son-in-law on a neighboring lot in 1946.<sup>13</sup>

The Rikansrud house was the only basement farmhouse, and the latest to be built in the Canton vicinity during the historic period. The financial responsibilities of farm living were understandably different than those in town. When Clifford and Olive Rikansrud purchased their farm property in 1948, the outbuildings were in sorry shape and the house, although rustic with a cookstove and no running water, was livable. The Rikansruds focused their energy and money on constructing modern outbuildings and getting the farm operations up and running, rather than remodeling or rebuilding the



house. Finally in 1952 they were exasperated with having to pump their water, but decided they could only have indoor plumbing if they built incrementally, starting with a basement house.<sup>14</sup> Within a week, the Rikansruds had listed their farmhouse for sale (it was moved to town and remodeled into two separate residences) and made plans for the construction of their basement house, which was built during the summer of 1952 while the family lived in the garage.

The Skyberg, Fee, and possibly Kappen basement houses, as the earliest built in Canton, are those which were built as temporary housing alternatives during the postwar housing shortage. However, the lingering basement house trend, evident in the construction of at least six more basement houses between 1949 and 1952, demonstrates that the form was seen as more than just a temporary solution to pressing materials and labor shortages.

Although the financial and familial circumstances of the original owners of the other basement houses in Canton are not known, this method of construction was probably embraced primarily for economic reasons which, for the Skybergs, Fees, and Kappen, were exacerbated by the postwar housing shortage. Clearly this was the case with the Rikansrud house, and it seems likely that the Tokles, Bakers, Van Laars, Reinkes, and Fostvedts had similar economic circumstances.

Many of the basement house owners were not veterans of World War II, and may not have qualified for or taken advantage of Federal mortgage

insurance programs like those developed as part of the New Deal Federal Housing Administration (FHA) legislation (1934) and postwar GI Bill (1944). Influenced by economic hardship as teenagers during the height of the Depression, they were probably opposed to going into debt, as was the case with Olive and Cliff Rikansrud, who thought it best to have the money up front before they built.<sup>15</sup> This belief may have been supported by the home lending practices in place before New Deal programs such as the FHA and Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC, 1933) were enacted. In Crabgrass Frontier, Kenneth T. Jackson writes:

The HOLC . . . introduced, perfected, and proved in practice the feasibility of the long-term, self-amortizing mortgage with uniform payments spread over the whole life of the debt. In the nineteenth century, a stigma attached to the existence of a mortgage; well-established families were expected to purchase homes out-right. After World War I, however, rising costs and increasing consumer debt made the mortgage a more typical instrument for the financing of a home. Indeed, housing became extraordinarily dependent on borrowed money, both to finance construction and to finance the final purchase. During the 1920s, a boom period in home building, the typical length of a mortgage was between five and ten years, and the loan itself was not fully paid off when the final settlement was due. Thus, the homeowner was periodically at the mercy of arbitrary and unpredictable forces in the money market. When money was easy, renewal every five or seven years was no problem. But if a mortgage expired at a time when money was tight, it might be impossible for the homeowner to secure a renewal, and foreclosure would ensue.<sup>16</sup>

Couples who witnessed the foreclosure of friends' or family members' homes during the Depression may have been understandably more conservative in

financing their own home construction, opting instead to build incrementally in the form of a basement house.

Building a basement house probably improved a first-time homeowner's chances for securing a loan for the eventual construction of the house's superstructure. As Lois Fitzner pointed out, the construction of a basement house allowed the owners to build equity in preparation for a later mortgage.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the construction of the Skyberg basement house was paid off in full by the time the couple began construction on the above-ground stories. Minimal risk of financial loss, combined with the recognition of a basement house as simply a way to achieve a dream house one level at a time, as was suggested by some popular home publications,<sup>18</sup> meant that basement house construction made perfect sense for first-time home owners.

The number of basement houses in Canton and nearby Sioux Falls<sup>19</sup> probably influenced the construction of additional examples, despite the town's initial reservations about the building form. Lois Fitzner recalls, "I know there were people who commented that, boy, they wouldn't do that. And you get that from doing something that's out of the ordinary. But I was happy for having done it, because we ended up with a nice house by doing it that way."<sup>20</sup> Esther Fee apparently felt a twinge of uncertainty about raising a family in a basement house, but she said "my boys went to high school here and graduated, and they're all out on their own, so I don't think living in a basement stopped them."<sup>21</sup> As more basement houses were constructed in



Canton, the form gained acceptance and recognition as a viable alternative to conventional house building during the postwar period, as is evident in the number of examples in the area.

The nine families who constructed basement houses in the Canton area were influenced by economic concerns which were exacerbated during the immediate postwar period by the critical local housing shortage. The construction time span of these nine basement houses indicates that the form became accepted by the community as a viable construction alternative, establishing a legacy of basement house building in Canton.<sup>22</sup>

### Physical Characteristics

#### Exterior

The vernacular origins of basement house construction, which were passed along by sight and word of mouth, resulted in great deal of variation and modification among the houses in Canton. However, there are certain characteristics, in their construction materials, form, and plan, which are typical of the houses as a whole.

Basement houses were most distinguishable during their first phase of construction (as basements only) due to their unusual form (see Figure 28, Appendix A). Typically the exterior walls were constructed of concrete block

which projected approximately two feet above ground, the height of an average foundation (Figure 38, Appendix A). All but one of the basement houses in Canton were built this way; the exception is the basement house at 221 South Johnson, the exterior walls of which were constructed of poured concrete.<sup>23</sup> Unusual among the basement houses in Canton is the Skyberg house, the basement walls of which were insulated with granular insulation poured into the holes in the concrete block.<sup>24</sup> Basement houses, which were usually rectangular in shape, were topped by flat roofs which were covered with tar paper and gravel, like the flat roofs on commercial structures.

Windows were set into the uppermost part of the basement wall on all four sides of the building. The basement house windows in Canton were one of two sizes, operable, and varied from house to house, dependent on available window types, expense, and possibly the length of time the family intended to dwell in the basement house. The Skyberg and Fee houses employed relatively large windows, 32 x 24 inches (Figure 39, Appendix A), whereas the Tokle, Van Laar, Kappen, and Rikansrud houses used smaller, standard basement windows, approximately 32 x 16 inches (Figure 40, Appendix A). Single-, two-, and three-light windows appeared throughout the Canton houses. The Skyberg windows consisted of three vertical lights, and the Tokle, Kappen, and Rikansrud houses utilized windows with a single muntin dividing the lights. The windows in the Fee and Van Laar basement houses were single-light. Two of the basement windows in the Rikansrud

house were glass block. Window wells were excavated to allow for more daylight to penetrate the interiors of the Skyberg, and later, Fee houses.<sup>25</sup>

The flat, boxy geometry of the basement house was offset by the addition of the entranceway, which typically consisted of a stairway which began on-grade and slanted down into the basement, covered by an eaveless shed roof (Figure 41, Appendix A). These covered stairways were one of the most distinguishing features of a basement house, as the basement entrance was usually intended to become the back door to the above-ground house. The stairway was located at the rear of the building on the Skyberg, Tokle, Baker, and Kappen houses, and at the side, where it would connect with the garage, on the Fee, Van Laar, Reinke, Fostvedt, and Rikansrud houses. The original entrances to the Skyberg and Fee houses were modified shortly after construction of the basement house. The Skybergs decided to add a basement garage approximately six months after the basement house was completed (see Figure 27, Appendix A).<sup>26</sup> The original stairway structure remained intact to the rear of the house, but the family used the entrance from the garage most often (Figure 42, Appendix A). The Fees relocated a garage to their property several years after they moved in to their basement house (Figure 43, Appendix A).<sup>27</sup> At that time, Tom Fee reconstructed the entrance to be more substantial.<sup>28</sup> These entrance schemes indicate both the history of the buildings as basement houses and their future aspirations.



The fact that the basement houses were intended to be built upon is evident in their structural systems, although they tended not to be particularly over-engineered. The roof structures of the Fee and Rikansrud basement houses were supported by steel I-beams.<sup>29</sup> In the Fee house, two short steel beams span the width of the house, whereas the Rikansrud house utilizes one beam which runs the length of the building. On top of the steel beam(s) rested 2 x 10 inch wood floor joists, which served as roof rafters for the building's duration as a basement house. Presumably the other basement houses featured a structural system of floor joists paired with steel or wooden columns or a wood stud bearing wall. The Skyberg house, however, employs an unusual structural system. Rather than steel beams or columns, interior concrete-block bearing walls were constructed to carry the weight of the roof and future floor above (Figure 44, Appendix A). The bearing walls were set at right angles to each other, in a T configuration, and doorways through the walls were spanned by cast-concrete lintels. It is not known why this method was utilized rather than steel, although as the earliest basement house built in Canton in the postwar period, concrete block may have been more plentiful and less expensive than steel for residential construction.

Although the exterior appearances of the basement houses in Canton were quite similar, variations of materials and construction methods were evident. The Skyberg house, as one of the first, and possibly the very first, basement houses built in Canton, initiated several conventions of

construction which were followed to various degrees in the construction of the nearby basement houses. The exterior appearance, with its concrete-block walls, flat roof, and slanted-roof rear entry, was most duplicated. The interior details, such as the granular insulation in the exterior walls and the concrete bearing wall structure, were less noticeable from the exterior, and therefore less copied. Hence a variety of physical characteristics ensued, reflective of the individuality of their owners.

### Interior

The interiors of the Canton basement houses varied considerably, as can be expected. The degree to which the interior plans were developed and surfaces were finished depended not only on the availability of materials and the personal taste of the owners, but also on the family's intentions for living in the house and building upward.

Likely the interior room configuration of a basement house was determined by the anticipated design of the above-ground house. The basements of the Skyberg and Fee houses were based on full house plans purchased by the couples from plan services.<sup>30</sup> Most of the other basement houses in Canton, however, were self-designed and/or self-built. Togle built the above-ground portion of his house with the help of his father, Lars, and may have already sketched out a floor plan before determining the layout of

the basement rooms. John Van Laar's son, Albert, vaguely remembers that Van Laar worked from a set of full house plans, although the basement house changed ownership before the above-ground portion was constructed, and the original plans were not carried through to completion. The Rikansruds designed the above-ground portion of their house together with their contractor after the basement had been constructed. As expected, the families who had enough foresight to build a basement house as the first step towards their dream home planned the interiors of their houses carefully as well.

In all but one of the surveyed examples,<sup>31</sup> the basement kitchen was aligned directly below the eventual above-ground kitchen to save plumbing expenses (Figures 45-50, Appendix A).<sup>32</sup> The basement kitchen in the Van Laar house most closely approximated the probable design of the upstairs kitchen, as the room is contained within four walls and is accessed through a doorway from the living room. The Kappen basement house kitchen was similarly discreet and set apart from the other living areas of the basement. In the Skyberg, Fee, and Rikansrud houses, the kitchen areas were arranged at one end of a larger living space. This design approach, of a kitchen adjacent to the main living area and the absence of a formal dining room, was widely advocated by the architectural press during the early postwar period.<sup>33</sup> However, since the above-ground spaces in the Skyberg and Rikansrud houses do not replicate this configuration, it is not known how strongly the design of the basement kitchen areas were influenced by these articles. The



Tokle house is the exception to the kitchen alignment rule in Canton. The above-ground kitchen is located at the southeast corner of the house, adjacent to the basement stairwell. However, the stove hookup, and presumably the rest of the kitchen fixtures and appliances, was located in the northwest corner. The kitchen placement was a rule of thumb that was, apparently, not always followed in basement house construction.

The surveyed basement houses in Canton, with the exception of the Tokle house, retain many of the original basement kitchen fixtures. In all of the examples, a room space that was once designated for kitchen use still exists.<sup>34</sup> In the Skyberg and Kappen basement kitchens, the original cupboards are intact, although the sinks and countertops have been replaced. The Rikansrud, Van Laar, and Fee basement kitchens retain not only cupboards and other fixtures, but also appliances, although the kitchens that are still used regularly (the Van Laar and Fee basements are still occupied) have been somewhat modified, including the replacement of some appliances.

In the Skyberg and Rikansrud houses, the proximity of the kitchen to the main living area of the basement resulted in the use of the space as an all-purpose "rumpus room" after the construction of the above-ground house (Figures 51-52, Appendix A). Areas that could be used for informal family living were another aspect of postwar residential design that was advocated by the architectural press.<sup>35</sup> Whether or not it was designed with the intention of being such a room, the basement space converted nicely to that use once

the family moved above ground.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps because they doubted their ability to expand above-ground, the Fees planned the interior of their basement house to feel as spacious as possible. Esther Fee recalls having visited her sister-in-law's basement house in Sioux Falls:

Now, so many of the basement houses, they would shut off, have a wall for each room, which did make you feel like you were enclosed. But her house, you walked in and you could see most of the house, excepting the bedrooms and the bathroom. And I decided that, now that wasn't a bad house at all. It really wasn't. It was really nice. . .<sup>37</sup>

Although they based the interior room arrangement on the Garlinghouse plans they had purchased, the Fees maintained an open plan by relocating the stairway to the southeast corner of the living room and constructing a wall between the dining area and living room, creating an L-shaped living area (Figures 53-54, Appendix A). The two bedrooms and bathroom are located on the north side of the house, separated from the living area by a doorway and short hallway. In fact, when the family first moved in, they had constructed only the exterior walls and the bathroom enclosure; the other room divisions were constructed by Tom Fee over the years.

As the basement and upstairs kitchens were aligned to save plumbing materials, so too were the bathrooms aligned in most of the basement houses in Canton. Frequently the bathroom was adjacent to the laundry room, as was the case with the Skyberg house, or even contained within the same room, as was evident in the Van Laar and Rikansrud houses (Figures 55-56, Appendix

A). With the exception of the Fee house, which has been lived in continuously as a basement since it was first constructed, the basements had 3/4 baths, with showers instead of bathtubs. The absence of bathtubs was characteristic of other postwar temporary housing forms, such as Quonset huts, barracks, and trailers, demonstrating the influence of lingering materials shortages and economy on the part of the owners.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to a kitchen, bathroom, and living area, the basement houses usually had one or two bedrooms (Figures 57-60, Appendix A), regardless of the number of bedrooms planned for the above-ground stories, and a furnace/laundry room. Furnaces to heat the full house were usually installed from the outset, and ductwork was reworked or added to when needed to heat the upstairs. With the exception of the Tokles, who probably economized by not heating the basement, the basement houses were said to be warm in the winter and comfortably cool in the summer. Both Esther Fee and Lois Fitzer commented that the spring and fall were the worst months for living in the basement. Lois Fitzer said "spring and fall. . . the temperature wasn't comfortable. Winter it was cozy and summertime was nice and cool. And I can remember being happy to go outside for a while and get into the sunshine, but more for the warmth than anything."<sup>39</sup>

The extent to which the basement rooms and surfaces were finished varied from house to house, depending a great deal on the length of time the family anticipated living in the basement. The interior of the Fee basement



house, which has been lived in continuously since 1948, is most finished in appearance, with plaster walls and wood trim around the doors and closets in the bedroom area. In all of the other basement houses, the concrete block walls were painted, but otherwise unfinished. The Skyberg and Rikansrud basement houses were well-finished, with one-inch cove moldings around the ceilings and trimmed-out door frames. The Van Laar house, the above-ground story of which was not completed until 1960, was most finely finished, with detailed two-inch ceiling moldings and substantial door trim throughout (Figures 61-62, Appendix A). Details such as these, while obviously an extra expense,<sup>40</sup> helped to make the basement space look and feel more comfortable and assured the families that they were not "settling" for living in a basement.

Where the basement house families splurged on moldings, they saved on doors and other hardware. Relatively old-fashioned five-panel and two-panel hardwood doors were salvaged from other buildings and installed in several of the basement houses (Figures 63-64, Appendix A).<sup>41</sup> The door leading from the stairway to the basement in the Rikansrud house was recycled from Olive Rikansrud's parents' house and flipped upside down so the doorknob would be at a comfortable height as one stood on the stairs above it (Figure 65, Appendix A). These doors may be further evidence of the extent of the postwar materials shortage as well as another way to save construction costs.

Although clearance in the basement houses averaged about seven feet,<sup>42</sup> few of the houses felt as cramped as that short height would tend to indicate. Efforts to make the space livable, through an open plan, large windows, and homey finishes were largely successful.

Raising a family in a basement house presented some unusual challenges. For instance, the Skybergs, who had two toddlers during the time they lived in the basement, built a fenced-in play area adjacent to the basement door, as the high basement windows prevented them from watching the children at play from inside the house.<sup>43</sup> The informal nature of basement house living and decor was probably just right for raising a postwar family. Esther Fee stated that "The kids always enjoyed the house. They had lots of friends that [sic] didn't bother them a bit to come and visit in a basement house."<sup>44</sup>

### Above-Ground Construction

As their families grew, so did the owners' desire to expand above ground. All of the basement houses in Canton, except the Fee house, eventually had their "tops" put on in the early 1950s and, in so doing, continued to illustrate the architectural trends of the postwar period. During the second phase of their construction, the basement houses in Canton shed their easily identifiable exterior forms and adopted the architectural styles

typical of the conventional houses which were by this time being built around them. The Skyberg and Reinke houses were constructed in what Virginia and Lee McAlester refer to as "Minimal Traditional," incorporating elements of the Cape Cod style popular in the postwar period.<sup>45</sup> These two houses featured intermediate roof pitches, minimal eaves and rake, attached garages, and an asymmetrical facade which departed from the style of the typical Cape Cod (see Figures 27, 33, Appendix A). The Skyberg house was further embellished by a prominent central chimney and rectangular bay window on the east elevation, while the Reinke house evoked the Cape Cod more strongly through a pair of gable roof dormers. As a one-and-one-half story example of basement house expansion, the Skyberg house illustrates a third phase of construction.<sup>46</sup> The Skybergs intended to finish the attic story with one or two more useable bedrooms, but Vern Skyberg developed cancer and died in 1954, before the couple had a chance to complete their plans. The attic story was eventually finished to contain two bedrooms and a bathroom in 1961 by Lafe and Jane Lunder, who purchased the house from Lois Skyberg (Figure 66, Appendix A).<sup>47</sup>

Above-ground stories were added to the seven other basement houses in the Canton area in the early 1950s as well. For these examples, a variation of the ranch style was widely preferred (see Figures 30-32, 34-35, Appendix A). Most of these examples were not as "rambling" as the ranch houses featured in popular magazines, nor were their designs as developed as other ranch



houses which were built in Canton during the mid-1950s. Instead, they were built to fit the conservative footprints, in both size and shape, of the basement houses on which they were erected.

The above-ground interiors of several of the houses further illustrate postwar design trends. Although wood was used to trim doorways and windows, the profiles were minimal and doors eschewed paneling in favor of flat surfaces. Plywood was used throughout the Skyberg house, not only in the subflooring, but in a decorative capacity in the kitchen and bathroom cabinetry, and in the mantle-less fireplace (Figure 67, Appendix A). Despite the open basement-level floor plans in many examples, most of the above-ground plans maintained discreet room divisions. The exception was the Rikansrud house, which consisted of one long space along the north side of the house and the three bedrooms and bath clustered to the rear (south) of the house, separated by a long hallway. At the time of construction, the Rikansruds also installed a pleated divider which could be closed to create a fourth bedroom in the northeastern corner of the house (Figure 68, Appendix A). The Rikansruds lived with the house in this configuration for many years, and only later opened the divider and re-oriented the closet to face the hallway rather than the fourth bedroom. This kind of interior expansion was also avidly promoted by the architectural press.<sup>48</sup>

The nine existing basement houses in the Canton area were not uncommon for the region or the time period. However, the large number of

them, built in a fairly conservative rural area over a brief period of time, is somewhat unusual. Other basement houses which exist throughout South Dakota, the Midwest, and other parts of the country provide historical and architectural clues which contribute to an understanding of the historical, economic, and architectural factors which shaped the construction of Canton's basement houses.

### Survey of Basement Houses

Because the majority of basement houses in Canton have been expanded and their original basement house appearances hidden, examples of original basement house construction were sought out and surveyed in neighboring towns and cities throughout the Midwest. This effort has helped to determine the regional context of Canton's basement houses within the architectural and historical context of similar examples. This research has documented the existence of several basement houses in Pierre, Elk Point, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota through photographs, and has established dates of construction where possible. Additional basement houses in Minnesota, Nebraska, Oregon, and Idaho have been located, which serve to illustrate the wide variety of forms and finishes characteristic of basement houses in other localities, and to demonstrate the widespread distribution of this type of construction.

To say that basement houses were a postwar trend is not entirely accurate. Although the houses in Canton all date from this period, a number of basement houses exist elsewhere in the U.S. which were constructed prior to and during the Depression. Six examples of basement houses built between 1929 and 1941 have been included in historic buildings reconnaissance surveys in Hayes and Frontier counties in southwestern Nebraska. Oddly enough, there is an equal number of basement houses in this area which predate these Depression-era resources, and the final survey report indicates a "legacy of sorts regarding the construction of underground houses in these counties," which "faded in and out of popularity on a fifteen to twenty year cycle."<sup>49</sup> The earliest surveyed basement houses in Nebraska date from c. 1910, both rural examples in Hayes and Cheyenne counties which portray the crudeness of early underground construction with large-aggregate poured cement foundations, short frame walls, and gable or hip roofs.<sup>50</sup> The survey report states that "the primary motivation for building such a house was purely economic. An inexpensive method of house building was crucial to the immigrant settlers who established small rural farms and brought little in financial resources."<sup>51</sup> Four more basement houses in the area date from approximately 1920 and are more refined in their characteristics than the earliest examples. Basement or underground houses have also been recorded in Scotts Bluff and Hall counties, again in southern and western Nebraska, but survey data and photographs are not yet available for these resources.



In contrast to the postwar basement houses in Canton, most of the surveyed basement houses in Nebraska have rather steep gable roofs. One of the earliest, c. 1910, has a hipped roof with a projecting on-grade entry, also covered by a hipped roof (Figure 69, Appendix A). However, most of the basement houses have gable roofs atop their short exterior walls and gable-end entries, allowing ample headroom on the descending stairs (Figure 70, Appendix A). The substantial appearance of the roofs make these examples look as if they've been partially buried, perhaps, although the windows are quite shallow and sit high on the wall, right under the eaves. Of the surveyed properties, only one, in Curtis, Nebraska, has an almost-flat roof, with a gable roof pitch so shallow as to be almost unnoticeable (Figure 71, Appendix A). This house has an entrance most like the examples in Canton, with a projecting exterior stairway covered by an independent roof.

Closer to Canton, a few basement houses were constructed in Sioux Falls during the late 1930s. One constructed in 1939, located at 1004 North Prairie Avenue, is similar to several of those surveyed in Nebraska, with a steep gable roof that allows an on-grade entry (Figure 72, Appendix A). A flat-roofed basement house which was built in 1937 stands at 1304 Bennett which, despite its early construction date, is quite similar in appearance to the Canton houses (Figure 73, Appendix A). Yet another basement house still stands south of Canton in Elk Point, South Dakota (Figure 74, Appendix A). The height of the foundation and corresponding large square windows may

indicate that the house was more typical of similar Depression-era examples than of the postwar basement houses seen in Canton. The ranch-style appearance of this house, with its gable roof and gabled entry, may have been a later alteration. The date of construction of this house is not known.

During her tenure as a Farm Security Administration photographer, Dorothea Lange documented three basement houses and one basement church in Malheur County, Oregon, all built prior to 1939, when the photographs were taken.<sup>52</sup> One caption describes the Wardlow residence as a "dugout basement house,"<sup>53</sup> but it is impossible to discern from the photographs whether the construction was of sod, as were the "dugouts" of the pioneer era, or of wood or concrete block. The interior walls of the Wardlow house appear to be finished with some sort of cardboard-like wallboard, and another has wood planks for the interior surfaces. The one exterior view of the third house shows an exterior wall, approximately four feet tall, sunken somewhat into the ground and covered with a low-pitch gable roof. The exterior view of the church shows a sunken stairway leading to a below-grade entry.

There are additional basement houses, especially throughout South Dakota, which were built around the same time as those in Canton. A basement house at 2200 South Hawthorne in Sioux Falls was constructed in 1946 and is somewhat atypical of the other postwar basement houses in the area, as it has a shallow hipped roof and a walk-out basement, the result of

the house being placed into the side of a hill (Figures 75-76, Appendix A). This house was, however, constructed with a roof system that would allow for vertical expansion.<sup>54</sup> Another postwar basement house constructed in Sioux Falls is located at 1008 North Prairie, built in 1947 next to the basement house at 1004 North Prairie and remarkably similar to it in appearance (Figure 77, Appendix A).

Several basement houses are located in Pierre, South Dakota. Many of these houses share some of the physical characteristics typical of the Canton basement houses, most noticeably a flat roof and projecting entry, and may have been built during the postwar period as well. Surveyed houses are located at 105 Jackson, 110 Park, and 1508 Franklin. Like the basement house at 2200 South Hawthorne in Sioux Falls, the house at 110 Park was bermed into the side of a hill, resulting in a daylight basement and on-grade entry (Figures 78-79, Appendix A). The roof of the house at 1508 Franklin has recently been altered from a flat configuration to a slightly sloping roof (Figure 80, Appendix A). The projecting entrance is intact.

There are a number of similarities between earlier basement houses and those of the postwar era. Although the postwar period was one of relative prosperity, the shortage of materials and skilled labor resulted in a widespread housing crisis which was worse than that faced during the Depression years. Whereas the basement houses of the 1930s were constructed for purely economic reasons, the postwar basement houses were the result of



extenuating circumstances which resulted in economic difficulties for would-be home owners. The level of optimism illustrated by the basement house trend in both periods, however, is similar. The permanence of a concrete foundation is a symbol of the prosperity that people of the Depression and postwar eras hoped would eventually come their way, allowing them to construct the above-ground stories and complete their houses. The existence of earlier basement houses offers a possible precedent for the basement houses of the postwar era.

The assumption that earlier examples of basement house construction served as a vernacular precedent for the postwar examples in Canton and elsewhere is valid given the fact that this type of construction was not actively promoted by the architecture and building fields or by the Federal housing agencies. Only one period source, the aforementioned article in The American Home, has been located in the popular press. This article from 1946 featured two basement houses in Utah (see Figures 19-20) and practically provided a blueprint for basement house construction:

After procuring his plot of land. . . the prospective homeowner digs a cellar and stores it up with lumber. . . Trained to use his hands, he knows a great deal about carpentry and plumbing, and can do most of the work himself. The thickness of the foundation is determined and more lumber added to form a mold into which the cement is poured for the walls. When the cement has set, he adds his roof which will be the floor of his second story. This is then covered with tar paper and shingles and, if possible, raised a little to form an air space for coolness in summer. The walls of this foundation usually rise from three to four feet above the ground level and contain windows which are

almost ceiling high inside, in order to give plenty of light and ventilation.

Interiors are made very comfortable. The simpler houses have running water only, but the majority provide for the future and the plumbing is planned very carefully. A bath and kitchen sink are installed and also a good furnace, and the pipes are set so that they may be continued with small expense. Stairway entrance at the back will eventually be the cellar door.

. . . Basement houses were supposed to be temporary makeshifts only. But they have become a tradition and often whole families live in them for generations. So for those who find the home-building tug on their pocketbooks a little severe, why not take this tip and pay-as-you-go when starting to build that 'dream home?'<sup>55</sup>

Other than the poured concrete foundation, this description accurately depicts the construction procedure of the basement houses in Canton. Yet in their oral interviews, none of the basement house owners in Canton mentioned having obtained the idea for building a basement house from this article or others like it in the popular press. Although the circulation of The American Home was likely broad enough to influence construction trends, it is not probable that one brief article could have such a profound effect. Additional articles on the subject of basement house construction may have been published in other popular magazines, newspapers, or government publications, but the time constraints of this project did not allow such an exploration.<sup>56</sup>

The promotion of basement house construction may have been an obscure undertaking of one of the New Deal agencies formed at the height of the Depression. For example, five extant basement houses in Iona, Idaho date



from c. 1934, and were built as part of a local self-help cooperative.<sup>57</sup> These cooperatives were instigated by the Works Progress Administration and supported by Federal funding as a way to meet a community's assessed needs during the Depression. As a part of this cooperative program, sawmills, restaurants, and other business ventures were started up to get people back to work. In Iona, a small town with a population of about 200, housing was the assessed need, and nine basement houses—true starter homes—were constructed to provide both employment and shelter. Of these nine, four have since been razed or, more likely, become camouflaged by the construction of above-ground stories. The five that remain demonstrate a number of different roof forms, representative of the body of basement houses as a whole.

Basement houses may have been purely an architectural folk trend, the origins of which cannot be accurately traced. Many basement houses bear a striking similarity to sod houses constructed during the pioneer era (Figure 81, Appendix A). Indeed, when South Dakota was first settled by Euro-Americans in the late 1800s, few trees existed from which houses and other buildings could be built. A number of sod houses were constructed throughout the state which may have been partially or completely excavated (thereby earning the name "dug-out").<sup>58</sup> Unlike basement houses, sod houses were not built of materials substantial enough to support vertical expansion. Possibly the notion of this kind of building lingered in the back of people's



minds until economic circumstances and improved materials again presented underground buildings as a temporary solution to a housing shortage on the prairies.

The number of basement houses in Canton and elsewhere attests to their historic significance as a twentieth-century building type. Their preservation presents a number of issues, for both individual basement houses and the resources as a whole, which will be addressed in the next chapter.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The format of the dates listed (e.g. 1948/1952) refers to the dates of the two phases of construction.

<sup>2</sup> Lois M. Fitzner, interview by author, 27 December 1996, Blaine, Minnesota, tape recording.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that, for all the discussion about postwar styles, the Skyberg house was actually designed by Thornton in 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "V. Skyberg Buys Lots," Sioux Valley News (17 July 1947), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Esther H. Fee, interview by author, 11 January 1997, Canton, South Dakota, tape recording.

<sup>9</sup> In a letter dated August 6, 1997, Esther Fee recalls the construction of the Kappen house at 221 South Johnson. The Fees, at the time, lived in a rented house down the street and watched the basement house being built. Mrs. Fee did not recall this information when asked previously about other basement houses in Canton.

<sup>10</sup> It is not known for certain that the Bakers were the original owners of the basement house at 807 East Fourth. The property changed hands frequently until October, 1950, when the Bakers were granted the deed. The Bakers owned the property until 1960, when it was granted to Erskine McKee. The recollections of neighbors indicates that the houses were both basements at the same time, and as the superstructure of the Togle house was erected in 1953, the neighboring basement house must have been constructed prior to that date. However, the short time frame of construction for a basement house means that it is possible that the house was constructed before the Bakers owned the property, by either Hanson, Roberts, or Thormodsgaard.

<sup>11</sup> The chronological relationship between basement house, full house, and garage construction is interesting to note. Four of the original basement house owners—the Skybergs, Fees, Tokles, and Rikansruds—chose to erect garages before building upward with the basement house. In the case of the Rikansruds, the garage was built before the basement was excavated, to house the family while the basement house was being constructed. With the other families, however, the garage was the first external improvement made to the property after construction of the basement house. This may illustrate two things: the dire need for storage space in a compact, underground house, or the importance of the family car in postwar America. Regardless of the motive of construction, the garages in these four examples should be considered significant character-defining features.

<sup>12</sup> "Ten Building Permits Granted," Sioux Valley News (20 April 1950), 1A.

<sup>13</sup> Tax assessment records for the house at 222 North Cedar indicate an original construction date for the basement of 1946. However, the aforementioned article in the Sioux Valley News confirms the date of construction as 1950. Probably the neighboring house which Van Laar built for his daughter in 1946, part of the same tax lot originally, is the source of confusion regarding the date of construction.

<sup>14</sup> Olive Rikansrud recalled that she and her husband began thinking about building a basement house one evening while washing the dishes and getting fed up with the hand pump. (Olive Rikansrud, interview by author, 8 January 1997, Canton, South Dakota, written notes.)

<sup>15</sup> Olive Rikansrud, interview by author, 8 January 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, 196-197.

<sup>17</sup> Fitzer interview.

<sup>18</sup> "Half a Loaf," American Home.

<sup>19</sup> See Chapter IV regarding basement house survey and inventory.

<sup>20</sup> Fitzer interview.

<sup>21</sup> Fee interview.



<sup>22</sup> John Kay, David Anthone, Robert Kay and Kathleen Fimple point to "a legacy of sorts regarding the construction of underground houses" in Hayes and Frontier counties, Nebraska, in their Reconnaissance Survey Final Report of Hayes County, Nebraska (Nebraska State Historical Society State Historic Preservation Office, March 1, 1991), 57.

<sup>23</sup> This slight anomaly may indicate that this house was constructed before the other examples, although there is little other evidence, other than the length of Kappen's ownership of the property and Esther Fee's recollection of the house being built in 1947, to substantiate this claim.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzer interview.

<sup>25</sup> The Fees dug window wells when Elder Street, to the north of their property, was regraded. The raising of the street and sidewalks prompted the Fees to place additional soil around the foundation of their house to ensure proper drainage, which in turn threatened to block their only daylight source.

<sup>26</sup> Fitzer interview.

<sup>27</sup> Fee interview.

<sup>28</sup> The present hipped roof entrance structure on the Fee house is unusual for the examples in Canton, but is typical of other basement houses.

<sup>29</sup> I was unable to gain access to the ceiling/roof structure of all the examples in Canton, so cannot confirm that the other houses utilized steel supports.

<sup>30</sup> The Roti brothers, a contracting firm from nearby Fairview, South Dakota, completed both phases of construction of the Skyberg house. Esther Fee cannot recall the name of their contractor, but remembered that it was "whoever did basements in town." The Rikansruds employed William Beaners, a builder in Lennox, South Dakota, and George Harmelink, of Fairview.

<sup>31</sup> Access was not gained to the Baker, Reinke, or Fostvedt houses.

<sup>32</sup> The construction of a plumbing core (kitchen and bathroom back-to-back) was much advocated by the architectural and homemaking press, and

was one of the cost-saving measures employed in postwar mass development efforts such as Levittown. See Friedman, 139.

<sup>33</sup> See variety of designs in "House Omnibus," Architectural Forum (April 1945), 89-140. See also Friedman, 142; Shirley Maxwell and James C. Massey, "Postwar Houses and the Cape Cods and Split-Levels of the 1940s," Old-House Journal (July-August 1992), 58.

<sup>34</sup> Although none of the kitchen cabinetry, fixtures, or appliances remain in the Tokle house, the stove hookup valves are evident and the room size and wall placement remain unchanged.

<sup>35</sup> See Royal Barry Wills, "Flexibility for the Small House," Architectural Record (May 1945), 77; Maxine Livingston, "Houses Are For Families," The Architectural Forum (April 1945), 128.

<sup>36</sup> The floor of the Rikansrud basement house features a shuffleboard court laid directly into the tile, indicating that the owners consciously decided, either at construction or later on, to use the room as a "rec room." The Skybergs, on the other hand, intended that one of the basement bedrooms be used as a family room; a fireplace was added at the same time the above-ground fireplace was installed.

<sup>37</sup> Fee interview.

<sup>38</sup> See discussion of Quonset hut interiors in Howe, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Fitzer interview.

<sup>40</sup> The Tokle house, the most pared-down of those surveyed, did not exhibit any finishing trim elements.

<sup>41</sup> The door to the Tokle basement bathroom consisted of five horizontal panels; the Skyberg basement house contained a variety of doors: five-panel, four-panel, three-panel, and two-panel; the Rikansrud house featured a dark oak two-panel door at the entrance to the basement.

<sup>42</sup> Above-ground clearance was a more typical 8 feet.

<sup>43</sup> Fitzer interview.

<sup>44</sup> Fee interview.

<sup>45</sup> Virginia and Lee McAlester, A Field Guide to American Houses (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994): 478.

<sup>46</sup> It is not known if the attic of the Reinke house was finished at a later date.

<sup>47</sup> The configuration of the attic story of the Skyberg house is such that it could be used as a separate apartment if necessary, thereby offering space for three families to live within one house. The door to the stairway was located immediately to the left of the front door, offering easy, discreet access. The Lunders adapted Thornton's plans somewhat to create a sitting room, bedroom, and full bathroom where the designs showed a large master bedroom. This consideration appears to indicate that, even fifteen years later, the citizens of Canton were concerned about a future housing crisis situation.

<sup>48</sup> See "House Omnibus" for examples.

<sup>49</sup> Kay, Anthone, Kay and Fimple, 57.

<sup>50</sup> Kay, Anthone, Kay and Fimple, 58.

<sup>51</sup> Kay, Anthone, Kay and Fimple, 58.

<sup>52</sup> Lange's photographs of basement houses are published in Howard M. Levin and Katherine Northrup, eds, Dorothea Lange: Farm Security Administration Photographs, 1935-1939 (Glencoe, IL: Text-Fiche Press, 1982), 141. See especially photo captions 6-41, 6-43, 6-54, 6-55, 6-57, 7-19, 7-20.

<sup>53</sup> Levin and Northrup, 141.

<sup>54</sup> Bruce Smidt, Historic Preservation Assessment Form, Department of Community Development, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

<sup>55</sup> Long, 26.

<sup>56</sup> The difficulty of finding period publications on the subject of basement houses is compounded by the methods by which such articles are indexed. The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature is indexed by subject term, such as "housing" and "basements and cellars" and by title. Creative titles in the popular press such as "Pay-As-You-Go Has Long Been a Practice in Utah" offer few clues to an article's subject matter, so a search of periodicals is time consuming and infrequently rewarding. Extension service bulletins,



another possible source for printed material about basement house construction, are not indexed and were sporadically published. Future scholars interested in this subject should focus their research efforts on sifting through sources such as these.

<sup>57</sup> Thanks to Bert Bedeau, Idaho State Historic Preservation Office, for this information. Information on the Iona cooperative is included in "State of Idaho Application for Special Grant of Federal Funds for Self-Help and Cooperative Work," 1937 and Idaho Cooperative Loan Corporation, Self-Help Cooperatives in Idaho, 1935-1939, both housed in the collections of the Idaho State Historical Society.

<sup>58</sup> For more on pioneer sod houses in South Dakota, see W.H. Hamilton, "An Autobiography of a Cowman," South Dakota Historical Collections 19 (Pierre: State Historical Society, 1941), 532; Lynus A. Kibbe, "Early Recollections of a Pioneer Newspaper Man of South Dakota and Dakota Territory," South Dakota Historical Collections 25 (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society, 1951), 324; Anders J. Olson, "The Making of a Typical Prairie County: Day County, South Dakota, 1881-1906," South Dakota Historical Collections 36 (Pierre: State Publishing Co., 1972), 539; Federation of Women's Clubs, "Daughters of Dakota," South Dakota Historical Collections 33 (Pierre: State Publishing Co., 1966), 96.

## CHAPTER IV

### PRESERVING THE BASEMENT HOUSE

One of the intents of this thesis has been to explain the characteristics, circumstances, and historic context of basement houses so that the examples in Canton and elsewhere may be understood, respected, and preserved. The most critical step towards this goal is to establish basement houses as significant historic resources. Previous chapters have illustrated the historic context of these resources and have defined their physical characteristics. This chapter will further interpret the significance of the basement houses in Canton, based on their historic and architectural context and their integrity both as individual resources and as an ensemble. Preservation strategies for the most significant basement houses in Canton will be explored, and guidelines for the identification and evaluation of additional basement house resources throughout the United States will be explained.

### Historic Significance

Were they to be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places,<sup>1</sup> the group of basement houses in Canton would be considered primarily significant under Criterion A, as being "associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history."<sup>2</sup> These nine basement houses accurately reflect the social, economic, and architectural impact of the post-World War II national housing shortage in Canton, South Dakota. Although only two or three of the basement houses in this grouping were constructed in direct reaction to the materials and labor shortages which contributed to the crisis, their established presence during the eventual postwar housing boom prompted the construction of additional basement houses by people who faced continued economic constraints. The large number of basement houses in Canton demonstrates that this form was accepted and embraced by townspeople who saw it as a viable method of constructing one's "dream home."

Although clearly newsworthy at the time, the postwar housing crisis is often overlooked by today's architectural scholars in favor of the postwar construction boom, which resulted in the mass suburbanization of the United States and huge residential construction projects such as the famed Levittown developments in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey.<sup>3</sup> The basement houses in Canton, as resources of that brief postwar housing crisis period, are



some of the only surviving architectural evidence in the area that illustrate the local impact of the crisis. Their phased-in construction represents the hardship and disappointment faced by young GIs returning from war and others of their generation, factors which ultimately contributed to the postwar construction boom as these people sought to build the "dream homes" they had put on hold. As barracks, trailers, and other solutions to the housing crisis were by their very nature temporary and cannot be expected to last indefinitely, these basement houses are worth preserving as reminders of the housing shortage and for their conservative, phased-in construction which contrasts with the mass residential development of the later postwar period.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that basement houses were intentionally designed to evolve sets them apart, both architecturally and historically, from other styles and types of twentieth-century residential housing. Although additions in and of themselves are nothing unusual, few houses are designed to accommodate vertical expansion.<sup>5</sup> The unusual appearance of a basement house during its first phase of construction stood (and in many cases, still stands) as a readily identifiable symbol of upward mobility and the owner's intentions.

Although those basement houses which can be identified as such today by their sunken forms, low roofs, and use of historic materials accurately display their historic and architectural significance, basement houses which have had a superstructure erected as intended further this understanding. Especially during the postwar period, when the eventual end of the housing

crisis and the increased vigor of the national economy allowed for the addition of above-ground stories, basement houses were meant to become full-fledged houses. Once the superstructure was constructed, many of the basement fixtures, room divisions, and other features were left intact, and in this way serve to illustrate the history and evolution of the basement house.

The significance of the basement house trend is best understood by studying the two phases of construction together. Although evident on an individual scale in houses such as the Van Laar's, Rikansrud's, and Skyberg's, which retain historic evidence of basement-house living, the relationship of the Fee house, which is still a basement only, to the other eight basement houses further illustrates this trend on a citywide scale. Canton is one of a few places in southeastern South Dakota which demonstrates this kind of construction so extensively, and for this reason, this group of basement houses is especially significant.<sup>6</sup>

Basement houses may also be significant as a resource type which had its roots in a legendary aspect of American pioneer life, the sod house. As little written information exists to prove otherwise, one cannot help but draw a connection between this vernacular nineteenth-century form and the more recent, and substantial, basement house (see Figure 81, Appendix A). The ingenuity reflected by twentieth-century settlers and recently-married veterans in the adaptation of a tried-and-true vernacular form using modern

materials attests to the continued hardiness of the American spirit in the face of adversity.

Evaluating the significance of basement houses becomes somewhat problematic in regards to the National Register of Historic Places 50 year standard for eligibility. Although the basements of some of the earliest postwar examples will turn fifty years old next year, the fact that basement houses were meant to evolve and were not vertically expanded until several years after the original date of basement construction effectively extends their periods of significance to a date which may prevent them from being eligible for the National Register. However, the later construction of a superstructure over a basement house should be considered to add to, not detract from, the significance of the resource. For this reason, even superstructures which were constructed several decades after the original date of basement construction may be considered to be contributing features. The case for this exception could be made in regards to the possible future expansion of presently unimproved basement houses, such as the Fee house, as well.

Basement houses, especially unimproved examples like the Fee house, may also qualify for exceptions to National Register criteria as fragile or short-lived resources. As basement houses were meant to be built upon, those which remain in their original condition are exceptional and can be considered especially eligible for National Register listing.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, present-day code restrictions would prevent the construction and occupation



of a basement house now or in the future. The mid-twentieth century basement house trend was truly a product of its own time which cannot be replicated.

The nine basement houses in Canton are significant as illustrations of the postwar history, society, and architecture of that town. The earliest basement houses in Canton may have been constructed after observation of Depression-era houses or as modern adaptations of pioneer sod houses, after which the others followed suit. The fact that these homeowners took earlier precedents, representative of time periods and hardships that many people would prefer to forget, and adapted it for use in their own situations is a daring and remarkable feat. That so many would do it in one town is evidence of the extent of the housing crisis, the accepting social milieu, and the power of vernacular building.

#### Physical Integrity

Basement houses which possess a high degree of integrity most accurately express the historic significance of the trend as a whole. Several of the basement houses in Canton remain virtually intact and are worthy of preservation.

To be considered a basement house, a building must retain physical and historical evidence of having existed solely as a basement and having

been occupied in that condition for a substantial period of time.<sup>8</sup> As basement houses were intended to evolve and the eventual vertical expansion of most of them render them virtually unrecognizable as basement houses, interior characteristics must be considered when the history as a basement house is not immediately evident.

Physical characteristics which should be intact include the following: a finished basement interior room arrangement and wall divisions; kitchen and bathroom plumbing or, better yet, the fixtures, appliances, and cabinetry which made these spaces useable; and direct access to the basement from the exterior, usually in the form of a staircase leading from the superstructure's back door. The presence of steel beams or bearing walls, which indicates an over-engineering of the structural system, may also be an identifying characteristic. As distinct basement rooms and convenient access to the basement from the back door are not features unique to basement houses, proof that the basement was occupied as a single dwelling, through the confirmation of an original owner, descendant, or neighbor, or physical characteristics, such as the presence of intact kitchens and bathrooms, must be present.

Based on these characteristics, the Fee, Van Laar, Rikansrud, and Skyberg houses are those in Canton which best illustrate the notion of a basement house. Typically few of the basement houses in Canton had their basement fixtures, appliances, and room arrangements altered once the

superstructure was erected. For that reason, those that retain these original interior features are considered to be the most significant.

The Fee house, as the one example in Canton which remains as a basement, is considered the most significant example of this trend. Through its exterior form, including flat roof, attached garage, and above-ground entryway, its character is immediately noticeable and its history is recognized (Figures 82-83, Appendix A). Exterior details such as the concrete block walls, window wells, and asbestos shingle siding on the superstructure help to establish its date of construction. Interior modifications, such as updated wall surfaces, cabinetry, and appliances are inconsequential considering the intact state of the exterior form (Figure 84, Appendix A).

Two basement houses in Canton have basements that are virtually intact from the historic period. The Van Laar basement is still occupied as a separate apartment, and characteristics such as convenient access from the side door, kitchen, bathroom, and living areas are still present (see Figures 45, 62, 85, Appendix A). The superstructure of the Van Laar house was not erected until 1960 and, with only minor alterations, accurately reflects its period of construction and evidence of the house's evolution (Figure 86, Appendix A).

The Rikansrud house is similarly intact, with a basement bathroom, bedroom, recreation room, and kitchen (see Figures 49, 52, 56, 59, Appendix A). The kitchen includes a variety of period appliances, including



refrigerator, oven, and broaster oven (see Figure 49, Appendix A). The above-ground ranch-style house has minor modifications, including new siding, but is characteristic of its 1954 date of construction (Figure 87, Appendix A).

Most of the features which identify the history of the Skyberg basement house are intact. Although appliances have been removed from the kitchen, the cabinetry, counters, and sink are still present (see Figure 47, Appendix A). The basement retains a bathroom, multi-purpose room, and two bedrooms which demonstrate that it was occupied by the Skyberg family (see Figures 51, 60 Appendix A). Although another bay has been added to the basement garage, the original entrance to the basement through the garage is intact, including the original doorbell (see Figure 42, Appendix A). In contrast to the other basement houses in Canton, the original above-ground entrance to the Skyberg basement was not maintained as a rear entrance during vertical expansion. Instead, a second door which opens to the front porch was installed in what the Skybergs called the "sun porch," the room over the garage.

The Skyberg house is also significant as one the most intact examples of a basement house superstructure in Canton. The house's traditional style, original siding, brick veneer, and windows are characteristic of its 1951 date of construction and show the evolution of the basement house (Figures 88, Appendix A). Modifications which do not significantly alter the character of the house include the addition of a second garage bay and deck, the

installation of sliding glass doors on the rear (west) elevation, and the application of vinyl shutters on the front elevation.

The exterior of the Kappen house has been somewhat altered through the installation of aluminum storm windows and siding (Figure 89, Appendix A), and it is not as evocative of its period of construction as the Skyberg house. However, the basement kitchen cabinetry is quite intact, including a decorative wooden valance over the window opening (Figure 90, Appendix A.) The original basement bathroom has been enlarged and remodeled, as has the basement bedroom, and the finishes have been somewhat modified. The Kappen house could be considered to retain the minimum characteristics indicative of its history as a basement house.

Although the exterior of the Togle house is virtually intact (see Figure 30, Appendix A), few of the basement house's identifying characteristics remain. The basement stairway, which leads directly from the back door, is intact (Figure 91, Appendix A), as is the bathroom, although fixtures have been updated. However, all that remains of the basement kitchen is the gas hook-up, and the original basement living space has been significantly altered through the construction of a partition wall and new wall finishes (Figure 92, Appendix A). The main basement living area was remodeled by the present owners approximately ten years ago, but the basement kitchen alterations may have been done during the historic period, as the Tokles probably chose to move the original metal kitchen cabinetry from the basement to the

upstairs kitchen when the superstructure was completed. However, in Canton most of the other basement houses have retained their historic kitchens and appliances, so by comparison, this house must be considered historic, but non-contributing in its present condition.

The interiors of the Baker, Reinke, and Fostvedt basement houses were not surveyed. All of them exhibit modifications on the exterior, but interior basement spaces may be intact. Using the guidelines and characteristics outlined above, these three houses may be surveyed at a later date and possibly included in any local historic designation or National Register listing.

#### Preservation Issues

The example of the Togle house, which is now owned by a couple with two pre-adolescent children, presents one of the gravest preservation issues facing historic basement houses: how to preserve the interior character of the basement while continuing its usefulness. Few modern families have need for two kitchens, for example, especially when one of them contains inefficient, but charming, historic appliances. Interior spaces have been shown to be most conclusive in establishing and assessing the historic significance of basement houses, yet they are also the most prone to change. As preservationists usually resist regulating the interiors of private homes,



and rightfully so, strategies must be adopted by the homeowners to ensure the preservation of these unique resources.

### Preservation of Interior Spaces

There are benefits to living in a former basement house. The finished basement space provides twice the living area of many other houses of the period, many of which had unfinished or only partially finished basements. The division of the space into distinct rooms only furthers its usefulness, providing a ready-made family room, guest room, or home office. An extra bathroom is an asset in any household. And as the Van Laar and Baker houses have demonstrated, a former basement house may provide income as a separate apartment.<sup>9</sup>

In adapting a basement house for modern use, a primary consideration is maintaining the basement room divisions and spatial arrangement. Few families have need for expansive basement spaces which would require the removal of walls or other partitions. Owners should try to adapt the use of a room, rather than the floor plan, to fit their needs. Wall and flooring surfaces may be upgraded and modified, but moving or removing walls is discouraged, as it would detract from the sense that the space was once occupied as a home.

Another recommendation is to maintain as much of the original kitchen and bathroom cabinetry and fixtures as possible. Although few households need two ovens, a second refrigerator/freezer and sink may be handy. If a sink or refrigerator is still installed in the basement, or an area for one provided, this space should be used even if the appliance itself is replaced. Homeowners should remember that basement kitchen areas can have many uses other than food preparation and storage. For example, original kitchen cabinetry and a sink would make an easy transition to use as a wet bar, craft area, or darkroom.

A basement bathroom could also be converted for use as a darkroom, although in most families an extra bathroom is an asset. When remodeling a basement bathroom, the original dimensions of the room should be maintained, even when fixtures are replaced. Since the nature of basement houses as temporary dwellings and the constraints of postwar materials shortages resulted in the installation of shower stalls rather than bathtubs, the expansion of the space to accommodate a bathtub would not be in keeping with the historic character of the room.

The stairway access to the basement, as another character-defining feature of a basement house, should be considered when alterations or additions to the superstructure are in the works. In order to give a sense of the basement's self-sufficiency, the basement stairway should always remain in its original location and in proximity to the rear entrance. Alterations to

the rear or side of the house, where basement house doors were usually located, should be planned not to disrupt the original basement entrance.

### Major Alterations to Existing Basement Houses

This guideline regarding above-ground construction also applies to the preservation of unimproved basement houses such as the Fee house. The Fee house is the only remaining basement house in Canton and as such the preservation of it in its present state is preferred. However, should the house change ownership and be deemed too small, the erection of a superstructure is not out of the question. Considering that this house, like other basement houses, was meant to evolve, the construction of an above-ground building on top of the present basement house could be considered the fulfillment of the building's destiny. Esther Fee still has the original plans from Garlinghouse Plan Service, and a house design which resembles this plan would be most appropriate (see Figures 36-37, Appendix A).<sup>10</sup>

As the basement is already excavated, the walls constructed, and the plumbing and electrical services in place, it is probably far less expensive to expand the Fee house vertically than to raze it. Demolition itself is costly, as is the removal of construction debris and the relocation and installation of services. The fact that the basement space is already inhabitable and finished



improves the value of the house, offering an opportunity to double the livable space for a fraction of the expense.

The construction of a superstructure on the Fee house would have to be carefully planned and implemented. Given the young age of the building and its planned expansion, the structure of the house is probably sufficient to support additional stories. However, care must be taken not to detract from the basement's historic character.

With the removal of the flat roof, a necessity in constructing a superstructure, those remaining exterior features which would best illustrate the basement history of the Fee house would be the placement and surfaces of the garage and entrance structure (see Figure 43, Appendix A). An above-ground house should be designed not to conflict with the location, size, and design of the garage, and the original entrance should be maintained, even if it does become a secondary entrance to the above-ground structure. As the garage's shingle siding, scalloped vertical siding in the gable ends, and fenestration are clues to its original date of construction, these elements should be retained.

The descending staircase of the Fee house should also remain in place as one of the most significant elements of the original basement house (Figure 93, Appendix A). Since the location of the stairway resulted in the slight alteration of the room arrangement depicted in the Garlinghouse plans,

the design of a superstructure should work around the location of the staircase.

As the interior finishes of the Fee basement house have already been somewhat modified, their preservation is not critical to preserving the character of the basement house. However, maintaining the basement room arrangement, which was planned by the Fees to mimic the interior spaces depicted in the Garlinghouse plan, is critical. Ideally the superstructure, if erected, would also hearken to the original basement house's spatial organization.

In accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, the design of a superstructure should be identifiable as new construction, although compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale, proportion, and massing of the basement house and others like it in Canton. If the historic Garlinghouse plans are to be used, for example, slight modifications can and should be made to establish the construction as a product of its own time. Slight variations in materials would be the most acceptable method of achieving this goal, although minor design modifications would also be appropriate. Before a superstructure is erected on top of the Fee house or any other existing basement house, the basement building should be thoroughly documented using photography or, in the case of the most significant examples, measured architectural drawings. Verbal descriptions such as those included in this thesis should also be recorded.

Furthermore, since the addition of a superstructure would likely detract from the property's National Register eligibility, effectively making the basement house which is now the most eligible for the National Register the least eligible, the property's historic significance should be carefully weighed before a superstructure is constructed.

Basement houses, like the people who have built and occupied them, are remarkably individual. These guidelines for preserving historic basement houses are intended as suggestions and are not universally applicable. Preservation and design professionals should be consulted when alterations to historic resources of this stature are being considered.

### Survey and Inventory of Basement Houses

The guidelines listed above explain how best to ensure the preservation of basement houses which have already been identified. Yet groupings of basement houses such as those in Canton deserve to be preserved as an ensemble. Preservationists should continue to search out, evaluate, and inventory basement houses in communities throughout the Midwest and other northern states, where basement house construction was likely to occur.

Nebraska's recent efforts to include basement houses in historic buildings surveys should be applauded and emulated. However, the survey



work which has been done has turned up only unimproved basement houses from the Depression era and earlier. As the examples in Canton demonstrate, it was far more common for a basement house to be improved than left in its original underground state, and the construction of basement houses was extremely popular in some locations during the postwar period. Therefore a more proactive approach towards identifying and inventorying basement houses is required.

Basement house survey efforts should be initiated when the development of a historical context statement of the Depression and postwar periods indicates severe local housing shortage conditions characteristic of basement house construction. Using the representative physical characteristics of basement houses outlined earlier in this chapter, preservationists can be on the lookout for resources which illustrate the two typical phases of construction. The fact that many, perhaps most, basement houses had a superstructure constructed which has disguised their original basement house construction makes identification of basement houses difficult. First-hand accounts by owners, neighbors, or builders may be virtually the only dependable sources regarding basement house construction. Information gathered from these sources should be verified through site visits, as many basement houses retain features such as full bathrooms, kitchens, and other finished rooms which illustrate their history.

The sometimes significant delay in constructing a basement house's superstructure may be all the more problematic for survey efforts. The practicalities of conducting a reconnaissance-level survey dictate that the survey period must end at some point, and the convention is to use an ending date of 50 years previous in accordance with National Register standards. Yet basement houses such as the Van Laar house, which was not improved until ten years after the original date of construction and appears to be a typical house dating from 1960, would be overlooked during such a survey effort. Where basement house construction is likely to have occurred, a cut-off date of 40 or 35 years previous should be adopted so that resources such as this one do not fall through the cracks.

Communities outside of South Dakota would probably benefit from the use of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps and other construction documentation in the identification of basement houses. For example, Sanborn maps, which are color-coded according to structural material, may indicate that a one-story or underground masonry building existed in a site now occupied by a wood frame house. A little detective work and some pointed questions of the homeowner could determine whether this example is an improved basement house.

As preservationists face the challenge of identifying and understanding resources from the latter half of the twentieth century, it will become more important to adopt proactive preservation strategies. In addition to those

focused towards identifying basement houses, as outlined above, communities would do well to begin to record the oral histories of community elders.<sup>11</sup> As the basement house examples in Canton have indicated, the construction of vernacular structures often does not leave a "paper trail" and the best information can be gained only through word of mouth.

This chapter has addressed the issue of preserving basement houses in Canton and elsewhere through the establishment of their historic significance, a discussion of their physical characteristics and integrity, and preservation and design scenarios. Basement houses in communities throughout South Dakota, the Midwest, and other locations in the United States should continue to be surveyed and interpreted.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is my intention eventually to nominate the basement houses in Canton to the National Register of Historic Places as a multiple property submission.

<sup>2</sup> "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation," National Register Bulletin 16 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Interagency Resources Division, 1990), 12.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the characteristics of Levittown and other postwar suburban development see, for example, Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, Chapter 13, "The Baby Boom and the Age of the Subdivision," 231.

<sup>4</sup> Two examples of postwar barracks rehabilitation still exist in Canton, and efforts should be made to preserve these structures as well. See Figures 94-95, Appendix A.

<sup>5</sup> One example which was intended for vertical expansion, although entirely above ground, was illustrated in Architectural Forum (April 1945), 137. See Figure 96, Appendix A.

<sup>6</sup> Judging from the ratio of expanded basement houses to intact basement houses in Canton, other localities which have basement houses, such as Elk Point and Sioux Falls, may have experienced the above-ground expansion of earlier examples. Since they are more difficult to identify from the exterior, it is not known how many of these expanded examples are present elsewhere in the region.

<sup>7</sup> National Register Bulletin 22, "Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties That Have Achieved Significance Within the Last Fifty Years," lists World War II frame buildings which were meant to fill temporary housing and office space needs as examples of fragile or short-lived resources. As resources of this same era, basement houses and other postwar temporary solutions such as barracks and Quonset huts, should be considered eligible. Marcella Sherfy and W. Ray Luce, "Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties That Have Achieved Significance Within the Last

Fifty Years," National Register Bulletin 22 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service Interagency Resources Division), 5.

<sup>8</sup> The examples in Canton were occupied as basements for a duration ranging from two to 49 years. Two years is considered to be the minimum period of occupancy for basement houses in this area.

<sup>9</sup> The basement of the Baker house is known to have been occupied as a separate apartment in the early 1960s.

<sup>10</sup> The reproduction of historic houses in Queen Anne, Italianate, and Bungalow styles has become quite popular in recent years, influenced in part by the rise of the Neo-traditional and New Urbanism movements. Construction from a 1940s-era plan could actually be considered quite trendy.

<sup>11</sup> Oral histories obtained from Esther Fee, Lois Fitzer, and Gerry and Vickie Veenis have been included in this thesis for this reason. See Appendix B.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Recently the national preservation community has paid a great deal of attention to the issues raised in preserving the "recent past." A National Trust for Historic Preservation conference on this topic was held in March, 1995, and resulted in a book of papers addressing issues presented at the conference. Several issues of CRM Bulletin, a National Park Service publication, have also addressed the issues presented by the preservation of late twentieth-century resources. These publications and events indicate that this is a time of great complexity for historic preservation, wrought with challenges that the preservation community must prepare to face.

Although many efforts to preserve the recent past have focused on significant works of Modern architecture by masters such as Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer, the preservation of twentieth-century vernacular architecture has been advocated as well. This is indicative of the preservation movement's increasing focus on local significance and a broader interpretation of what qualifies as a historic resource. Basement houses are examples of twentieth-century vernacular architecture which epitomize the



concept of local significance, as their construction was strongly influenced by local historic, economic, and architectural trends.

### Challenges of Basement House Preservation

As is the case with many vernacular resources of the recent past, the preservation of basement houses presents great challenges. Many, perhaps most, basement houses had a superstructure constructed which has disguised their original basement house construction. This fact, while adding to their significance, makes identification of basement houses difficult. First-hand accounts by owners, neighbors, or builders are virtually the only dependable clues to basement house construction. Information gathered from these sources can often be verified through a site visit, as many basement houses retain features such as full bathrooms, kitchens, and other finished rooms which illustrate their history.

The dependence on interior clues to a basement house's history and identity presents additional problems. Usually local and national historic registers resist designating interior spaces, as homeowners perceive such designation as over-regulatory and restrictive. However, in many cases the historic integrity of a basement house is integrally tied to its interior arrangement, finishes, and fixtures, and a lack of designation of these interiors may inadvertently destroy the significance of the resource. A proper

solution to this problem must be sought through educating homeowners as to the uniqueness of their basement houses' interiors and providing them with design assistance when modifications are proposed.

Education and creativity are similarly the best solutions to the problems confronting basement houses which remain in their original, underground state. The potential for destruction of basement houses upon change of ownership is great. Potential buyers should be encouraged to understand the significance of the basement house trend, both locally and nationally, and creative architectural solutions should be sought.

### Preservation Challenges of Postwar Resources

In researching postwar basement houses, I have become acquainted with problems which the era's resources as a whole present to the future of the preservation profession. The wealth of residential and commercial buildings which were constructed after the housing shortage subsided has resulted in an incredible number of buildings which will need to be surveyed and studied before their significance can be understood and their preservation addressed. This may demand that preservationists adopt new strategies in researching, identifying, and protecting this era's resources.

In confronting this huge number of potentially historic resources, identification and designation should be concentrated first toward the truly

unique and especially illustrative examples, such as basement houses. This is a different approach than that which may be taken in regards to the ubiquitous ranch house. Although the ranch house does have a place on the National Register of Historic Places, the best approach to determining which ranch house and why it is significant may be to wait until the resources weed themselves out through inappropriate alterations or the lack of association with important historical figures or events.

Unfortunately, this approach presents a Catch-22 situation, as waiting, for many resources, will result in losing valuable pieces of American architectural and social history. Although the National Register requires that properties be at least 50 years old, with certain exceptions, waiting until that date may prevent their preservation, as their integrity is undermined by alterations and their history is less understood as original owners, builders and other potentially knowledgeable people associated with the property pass away. I believe that preservation must move to identify potentially significant sites and attempt to understand their importance before the 50-year date, as by then it may be too late.

I have come to this conclusion in part because of the difficulty of researching the basement houses in Canton. Although three of the original owners are still living, and two still reside in the basement houses themselves, few other sources of information were available. Municipal records from the period of significance are sorely lacking, and Sanborn Maps



were not published for any town in South Dakota after the early 1930s. This is unfortunate for the state of South Dakota, which will have an even greater challenge in identifying, understanding, and protecting late twentieth-century resources, and disappointing for the rest of the country, as we have much we could learn from this state's recent architectural history. Proactive strategies such as oral histories, community histories and continued historic resource surveys, which perhaps aim for a 40-year cut-off date to allow for the thorough study of potentially significant properties, should be employed as an antidote to this lack of historical documents.

#### Opportunities for Further Research

A number of assumptions and extrapolations have been made about basement houses as a whole, based on the nine extant basement houses in Canton and a small number of visually surveyed examples. Further research is necessary to verify or refute the findings of this thesis and to contribute to the story of basement house construction. In particular, scholars should continue to search for the origins of twentieth-century basement house construction and its possible promotion by governmental bodies, design professionals, or the architectural and popular press.

Other architectural styles and trends of the postwar period present further research opportunities. The history, preponderance, and preservation

of temporary war structures such as Quonset huts and barracks should be addressed, as should other construction evidence of the postwar housing shortage. Preservationists should be aware that the housing shortage, which prevented many middle-class families from building anew, was a time of large-scale remodeling and renovation of existing houses. For instance, an article in Better Homes and Gardens from April 1946, showed the drastic remodeling of three late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century houses.<sup>1</sup> Preservationists may need to dig deep to determine the true date of construction of houses such as these, as well as consider whether these alterations themselves historically significant.

The architecture of Canton presents a number of research opportunities as well. As the town's nine basement houses indicate, the postwar period was one of great physical change for the town of Canton. A historic context statement which thoroughly documents this history should be written and resources dating from this period should be inventoried. A number of fine ranch style houses and other examples of early 1950s architecture exist in Canton, evidence of a possible secondary or tertiary period of significance for the town. Canton has a great many historic buildings dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well. However, only four of the historic properties in town are presently listed on the National Register.<sup>2</sup> Numerous opportunities exist for historic designation, and the wealth of resources would enable the creation of a fine

historic district. As Canton is presently trying to market itself as both the antiques capital of southeastern South Dakota and Norwegian center of the state, the presence of a National Register historic district could present additional opportunities for heritage tourism. Continued research in these areas will further enable Canton to develop a sense of pride in its historic and cultural resources.

### Summary

In part in an effort to contribute to the preservation movement's focus on historic properties of the recent past, this thesis has attempted to understand the historic significance of post-World War II basement houses in Canton, South Dakota. Through the study and discussion of their historic context, their architectural impulses, and their physical character, these buildings have been shown to be representative of a brief period in American history.

The postwar housing shortage was national in scope, affecting small towns like Canton as well as large metropolitan areas. Postwar families approached this hardship with a good deal of creativity, finding a way to fulfill their dreams for a new house despite materials and labor shortages and high construction costs. In Canton, the construction of basement houses was a common reaction to the national housing crisis. The basement houses in



Canton, especially the Fee, Van Laar, Rikansrud, and Skyberg houses, are historically significant resources which illustrate the social, historical, and economic implications of the postwar housing crisis. Others like them elsewhere in the country, many of which were built during the Depression era, are similarly characteristic of their time. From the identification and preservation of basement houses, there is much we can learn about mid-twentieth-century American life.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bob Jones, "Rescued Real Estate," Better Homes and Gardens, April 1946, 34.

<sup>2</sup> The four properties in Canton presently listed on the National Register are: Old Main at Augustana Academy; a house which is now home to the Canton Historical Society; one private residence; and a dam.

APPENDIX A

FIGURES



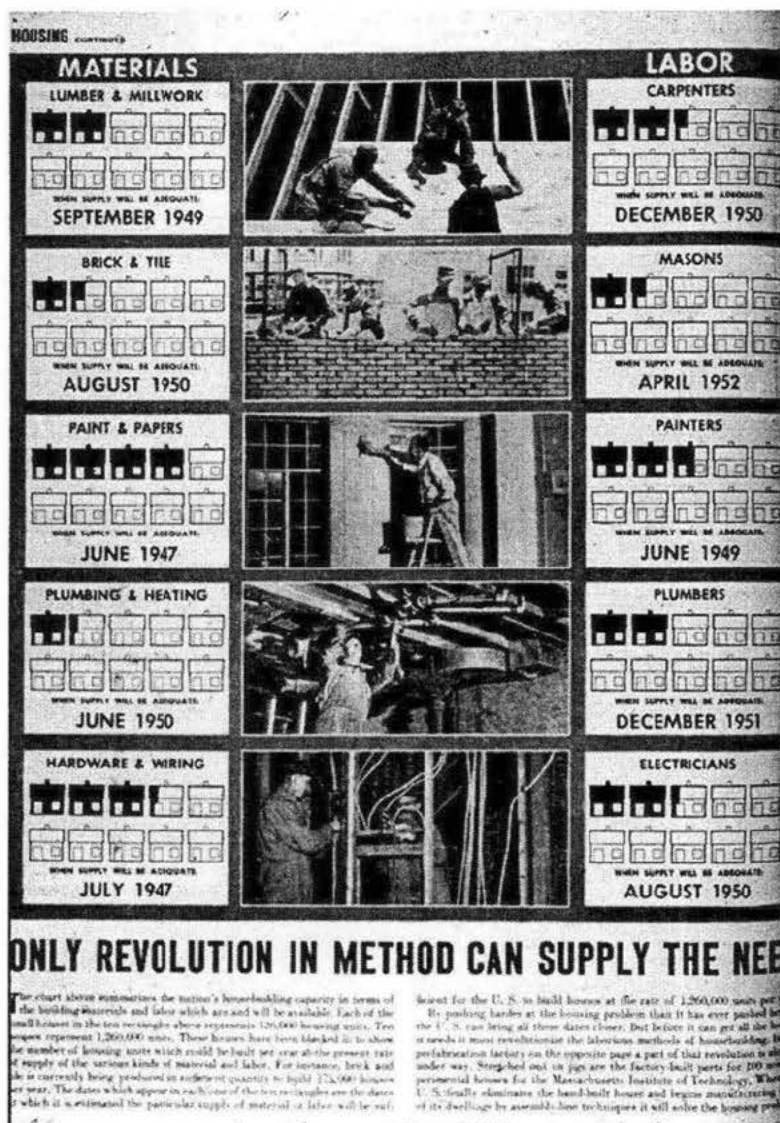


Figure 1. Chart illustrating the post-World War II shortage of building materials and labor. Source: "Only Revolution in Method Can Supply the Need," *Life* (17 December 1945), 34.

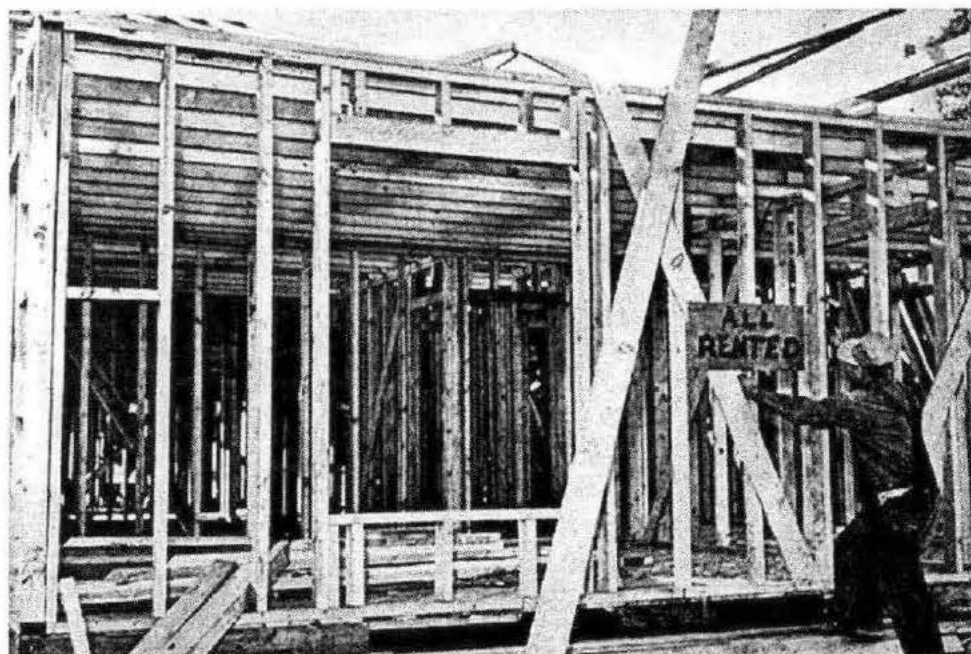


Figure 2. Photograph of apartment building under construction in Los Angeles, illustrating the postwar demand for housing. Source: "The Great Housing Shortage," *Life* (17 December 1945), 27.





# When He Comes HOME AGAIN

When he comes home, will your home be everything he's been looking forward to? Will it be comfortable, warm and friendly? Or, will it be just the same old home, with worn-out, sagging furniture... the same old "any" chair with broken springs and soiled, worn covering?

Now, you can start to make your home the kind he's always wanted (and you too). And start right away with one of our brand new **KROEHLER 5-STAR Comfort Construction** living room sofas. They're better-looking... more comfortable than ever.

*In the end—*  
**YOU GET MORE FOR YOUR FURNITURE DOLLAR—**  
*than any dollar you spend.*

**Only KROEHLER Has**  
**5-STAR Comfort Construction**

*Hand-to-down construction...  
 American made...  
 Satisfaction guaranteed...  
 Set-up easy. All items...  
 scientifically engineered...  
 number features are sure...  
 available to you.*

**YOU CAN HAVE A LIVING ROOM LIKE THIS!**

Look over this and heavy duty springs, padding the seating, living room, office and hotel's use...  
 working in the past **KROEHLER** for the **Kroehler**...  
 the **Kroehler**... **Kroehler**... and the **Kroehler**...

**J. ANDERSON & SONS**  
 Furniture  
 Complete. E. Del.

**COMPLETE FURNISHINGS FOR THE HOME**

Figure 4. Advertisement in Canton's local paper, showing the concept of a dream home as a reward for war victory. Source: Sioux Valley News (11 October 1945), 3A.

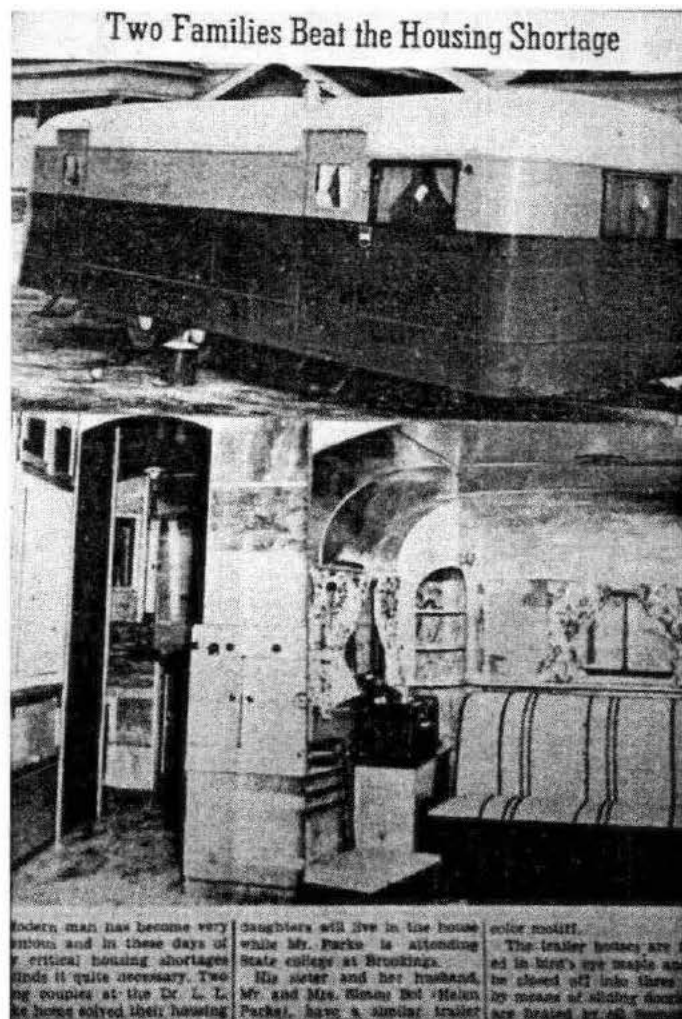


Figure 5. Photograph showing the use of government surplus trailers as temporary housing during the postwar period. Source: "Two Families Beat the Housing Shortage," Sioux Valley News (10 January 1946), 1A.

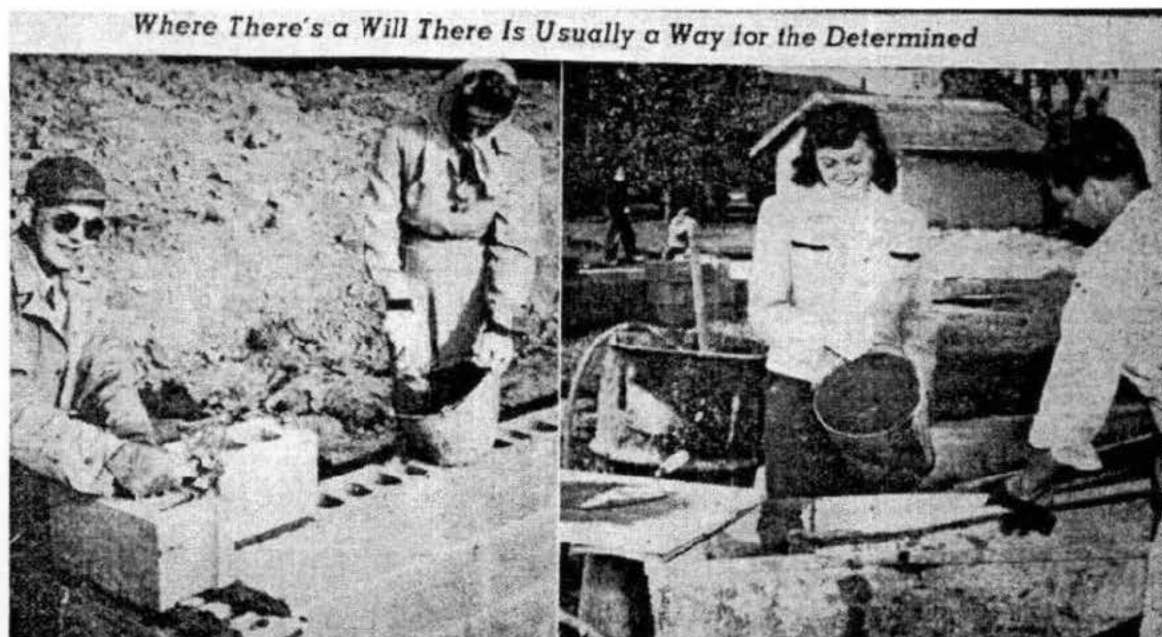


Figure 6. Two couples laying the foundations for two halves of a surplus barracks building set on neighboring lots. Source: "Where There's a Will There Is Usually a Way for the Determined," Sioux Valley News (20 May 1948), 1.





Figure 7. An example of the modern residential style. Source: "Mr. and Mrs. McCall Know What They Want," Architectural Forum (April 1945), 103.



Figure 8. The Cape Cod style. Source: "Mr. and Mrs. McCall Know What They Want," Architectural Forum (April 1945), 103.



Figure 9. A popular version of the ranch style in Canton, South Dakota. Photo by author.



Figure 10. Buckminster Fuller's prototype of the postwar Dymaxion Dwelling Machine. Source: H. Ward Jandl, Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1991), 82.



Figure 11. Interior of the Dymaxion Dwelling Machine prototype. Source: H. Ward Jandl, Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1991), 94.





Figure 12. A Lustron house. Source: H. Ward Jandl, Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1991), 184.

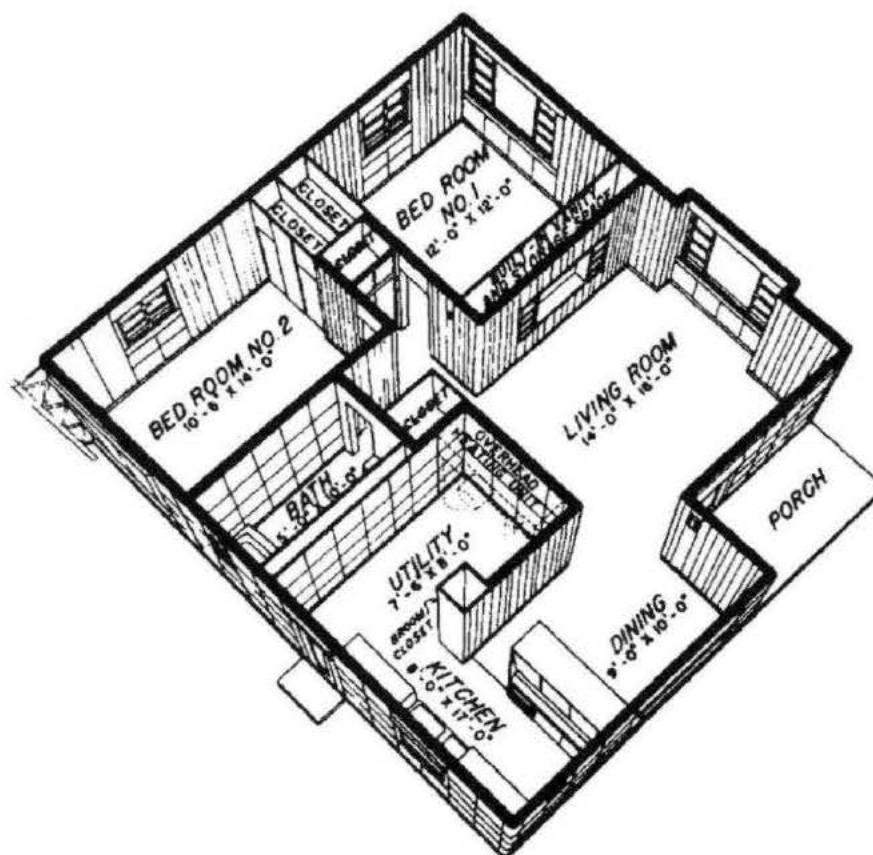


Figure 13. Lustron two-bedroom floor plan. Source: H. Ward Jandl, Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1991), 184.



Figure 14. Interior view of a Lustron house. Source: H. Ward Jandl, Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1991), 185.



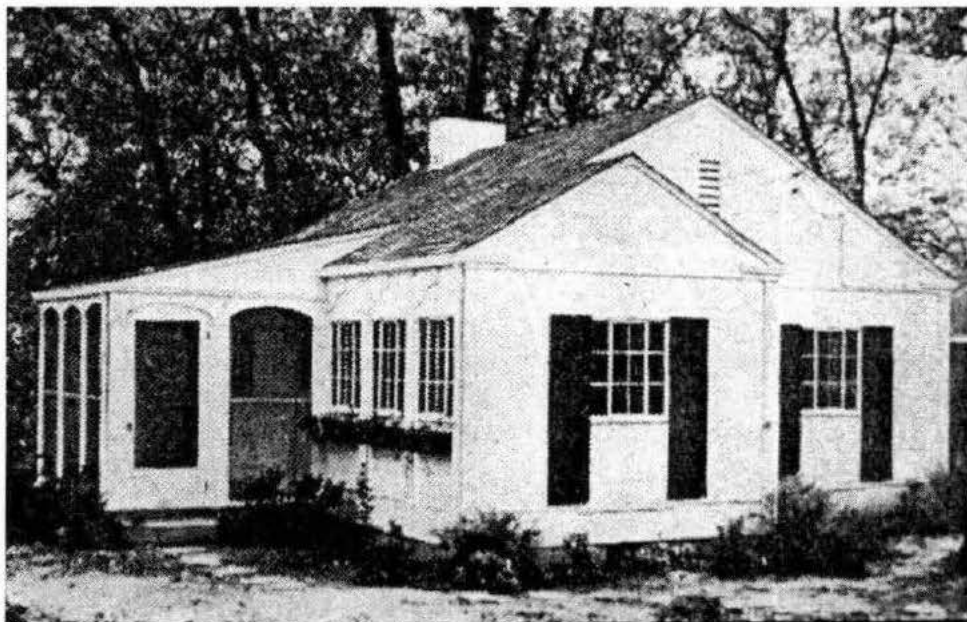


Figure 15. Gunnison Homes' prefabricated house. Source: "Housing: Factory-Built Solution?" Time (11 February 1946), 79.



Figure 16. Quonset hut used as temporary housing during the postwar period. Source: Hartley E. Howe, "Stop-Gap Housing," Popular Science (March 1946), 68.

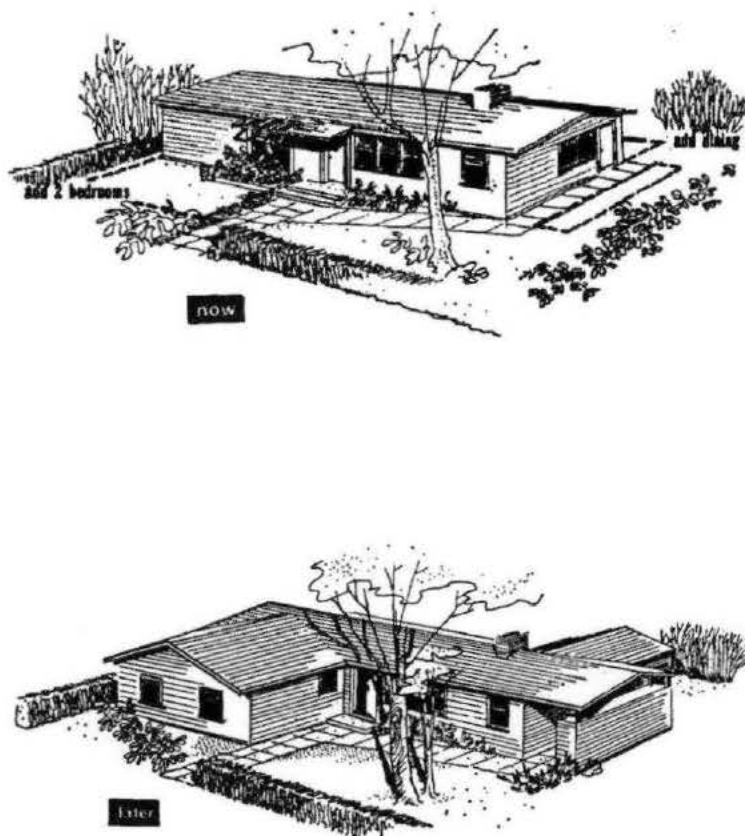


Figure 17. A ranch style expansible house scheme. Source: Planning the Expansible House: 6 Schemes for Houses that Grow, (Washington, DC: U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency, Office of the Administrator, 1947), 16-17.



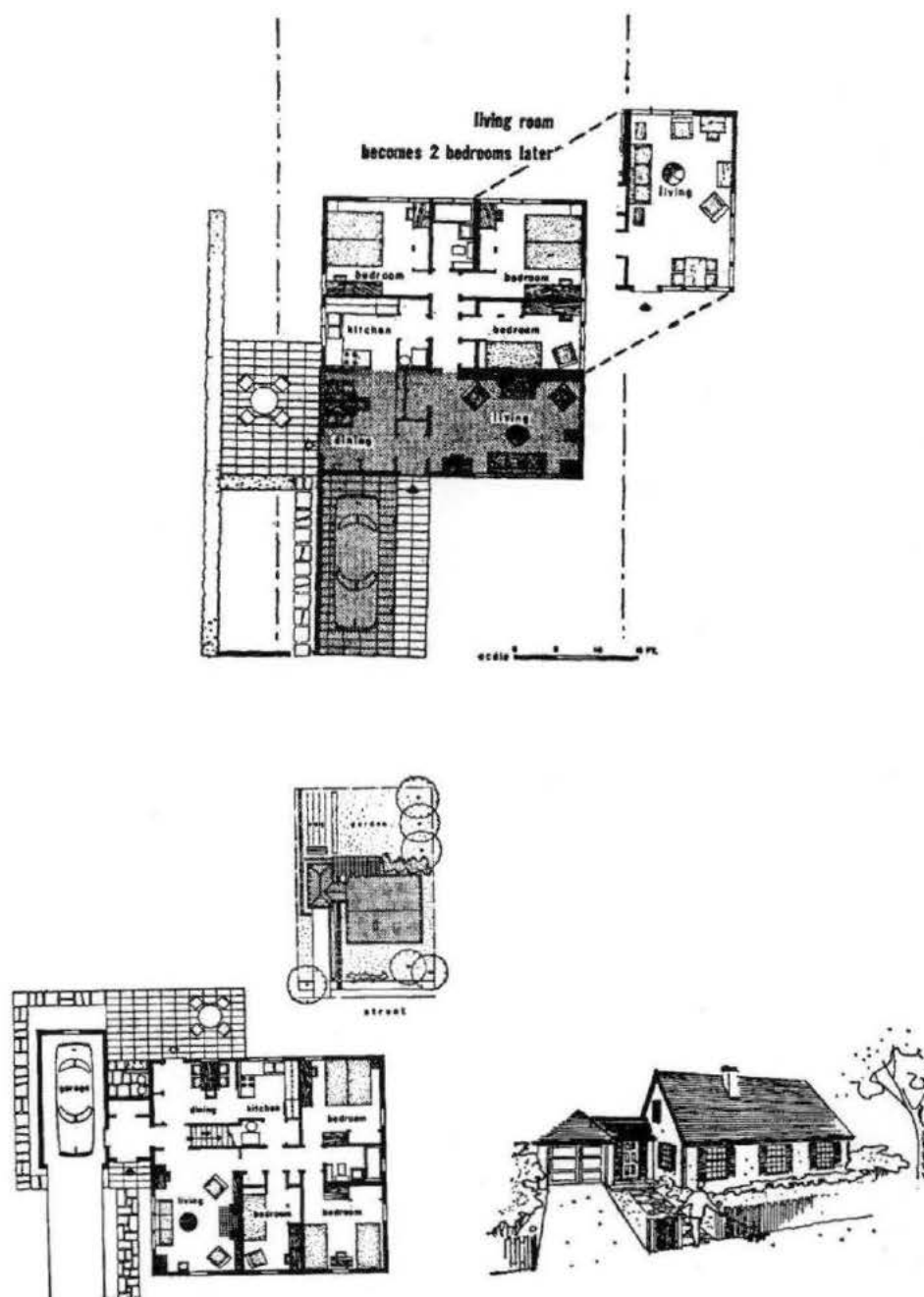


Figure 18. A traditionally-styled scheme for an expandable house.  
 Source: Planning the Expandable House: 6 Schemes for Houses that Grow, (Washington, DC: U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency, Office of the Administrator, 1947), 22-23.

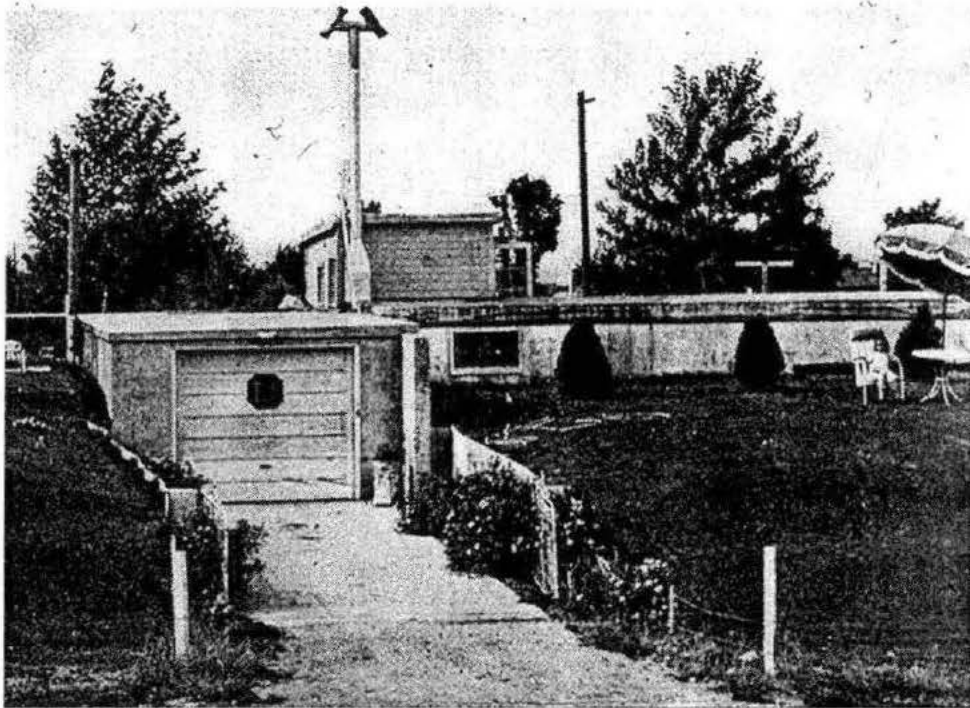


Figure 19. A typical basement house in Utah. Source: Georgia Long, "Pay-As-You-Go Has Long Been a Practice in Utah!" American Home (July 1946), 26.

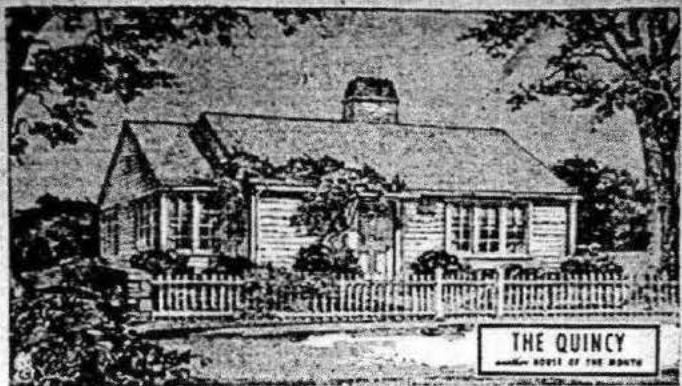


Figure 20. Another basement house in Utah. Source: Georgia Long, "Pay-As-You-Go Has Long Been a Practice in Utah!" American Home (July 1946), 26.





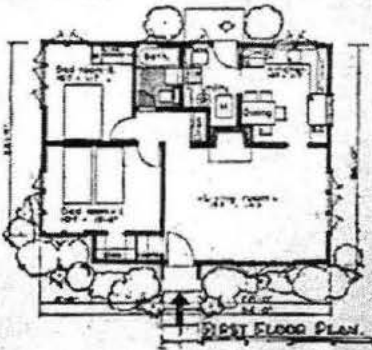
Figure 21. Newspaper photographs showing postwar rehabilitation projects in the Canton area. Source: "Three Ways to Beat the Housing Shortage," *Sioux Valley News* (5 June 1947), 6.



Exclusive Design of Monthly Small House Club, Inc.

This colonial home offers the utmost in good taste and full livability. Shingled roof and protected entry combine to form a pleasing facade. Living room has six casement windows and log-burning fireplace. Kitchen dining room is a work saver with glass paneling and built-in exhaust fan. Two bedrooms each have five corner windows and closets with sliding doors.

As one of the Post-War Series of All American Homes it complies with FHA standards, and its electric layout is approved by the National Adequate Wiring Bureau. Blueprints and specifications available from the Monthly Small House Club at \$7.50. Inquire at the News office.



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

Figure 22. Monthly Small House Club advertisement for a Cape Cod style house. Source: Sioux Valley News (4 April 1946), 3A.

**THE TAFT**  
Small House for the Future



Inclusive Design of Monthly Small House Club, Inc.

The quiet dignity and hospitable charm of Colonial architecture are embodied in this house for well planned building and comfortable living in this one of the Post-War Series of All American Homes. White wood siding exterior favors a shingled roof; the garage and L-porch are integrated in the exterior design. Spacious living room with fireplace; square dining room and well equipped kitchen fill the lower portion of the house; the second floor has three cross ventilated bedrooms; and there is a full basement.

As one of the Post-War Series of All American Homes it complies with FHA standards, and its electric layout is approved by the National Adequate Wiring Bureau. Blueprints and specifications available from the Monthly Small House Club at \$7.50. Inquire at the News office.

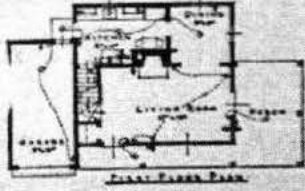
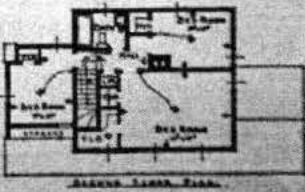



Figure 23. Monthly Small House Club advertisement for a traditionally styled house. Source: Sioux Valley News (9 May 1946), 3A.



If You Plan to Build . . .  
Let Us Furnish the Materials.

★ ★  
BLUE PRINTS AVAILABLE!

★ ★  
PHONE 29

**FARMERS ELEVATOR CO.  
LUMBER DEPARTMENT**

Figure 24. Lumber dealership advertisement for a Cape Cod style house. Source: Sioux Valley News (23 February 1950), 8B.

**The Braddock**  
SMALL HOUSE  
PLANNING BUREAU

**Make Your Building  
Dream A Reality!**

See Us For  
Top Quality  
MATERIALS

**FARMERS ELEVATOR, LUMBER DEPT.**

Figure 25. Lumber dealership advertisement for a ranch style house.  
Source: Sioux Valley News (23 March 1950), 5B.

**PLANNED FOR MODERN LIVING**



Efficiency and economy are the keynotes of this simple home that is modern in every respect. This beautiful ranch type home features cedar shingle roof and sidewalls and has been designed for you and your family to obtain the maximum in gracious living.

This modern treatment features an all-purpose room to be used as a nursery, playroom, study or guest room that can be made a part of the large porch by opening the doors to full width at the rear. All rooms are good size and ample closet space is conveniently provided. The semi-detached garage is skillfully and harmoniously tied into the exterior design. The cedar shakes walls are rich in appearance but surprisingly economical to build. They are available in a multitude of color selections and cost you less for every year of care-free service.

**FOR ANY TYPE, STYLE, OR SIZE HOME**  
Consult With

**SLAGLE Lumber Co.**

**HOME PLANNING SERVICE**

LENNOX - BERESFORD - HUDSON

Shown above are two floor plans, with basement and without basement. Only slight changes have been made in the plan to provide for a large entry room in the plan without basement.

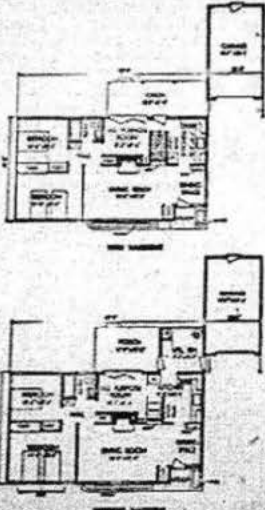


Figure 26. Lumber dealership advertisement for a ranch style house.  
Source: Sioux Valley News (24 August 1950), 4B.



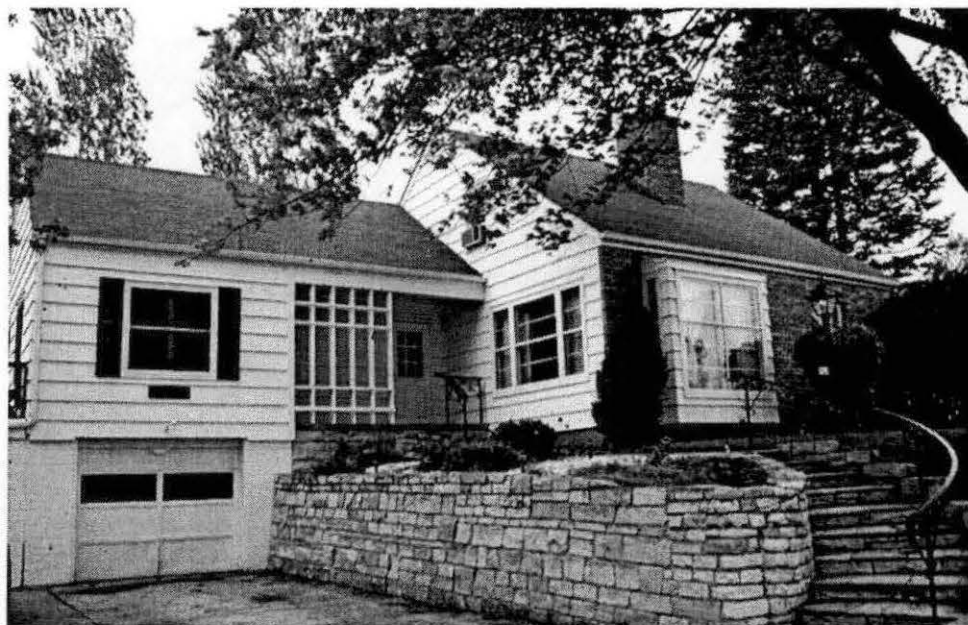


Figure 27. Skyberg house, 425 North Kidder, Canton, South Dakota.  
Photo by author.

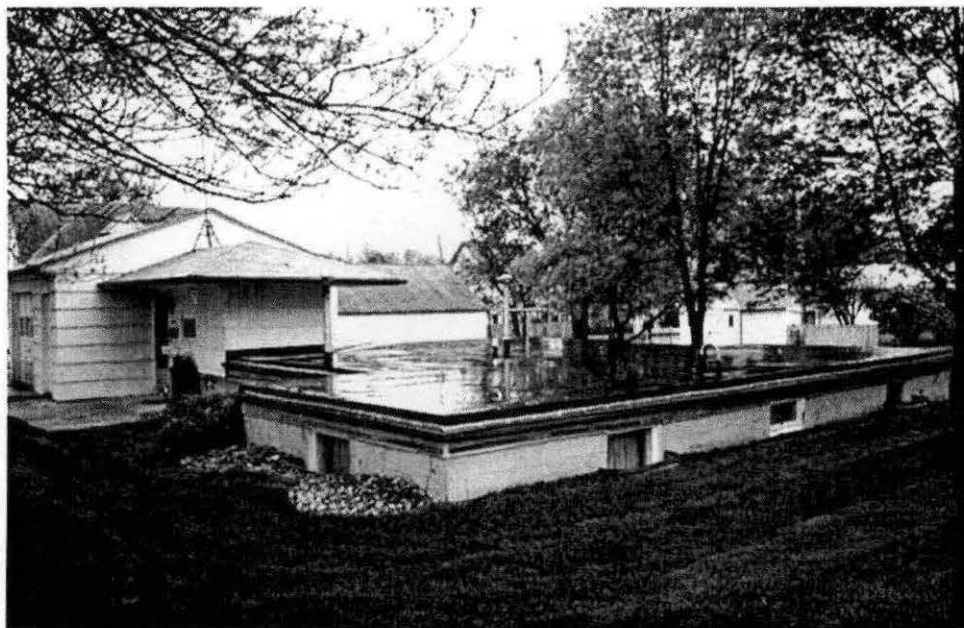


Figure 28. Fee house, 621 North Dakota, Canton, South Dakota.  
Photo by author.



Figure 29. Baker house, 807 East Fourth, Canton, South Dakota.  
Photo by author.



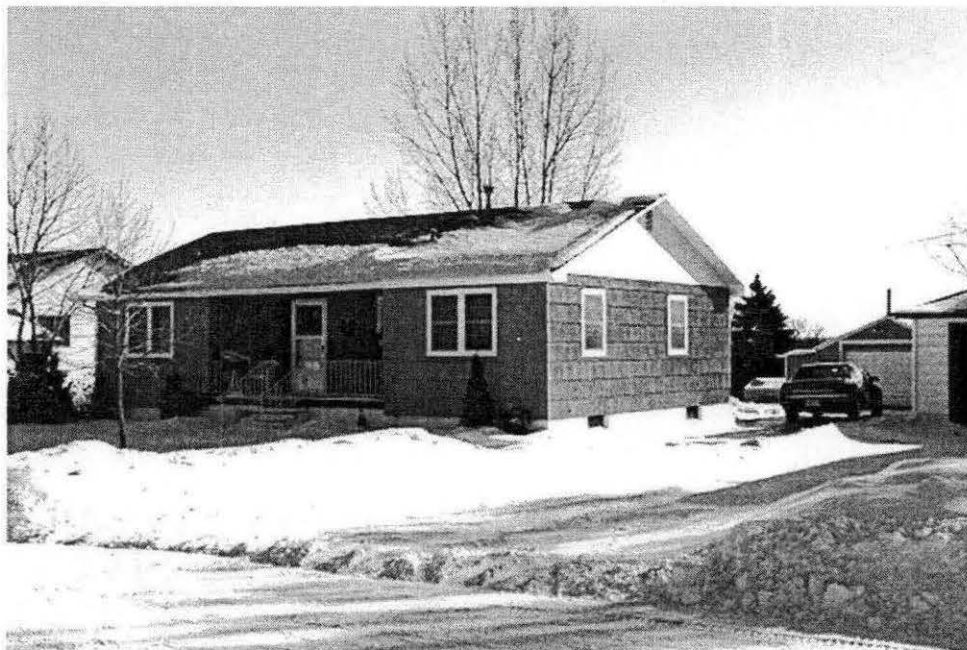


Figure 30. Tokle house, 809 East Fourth, Canton, South Dakota.  
Photo by author.

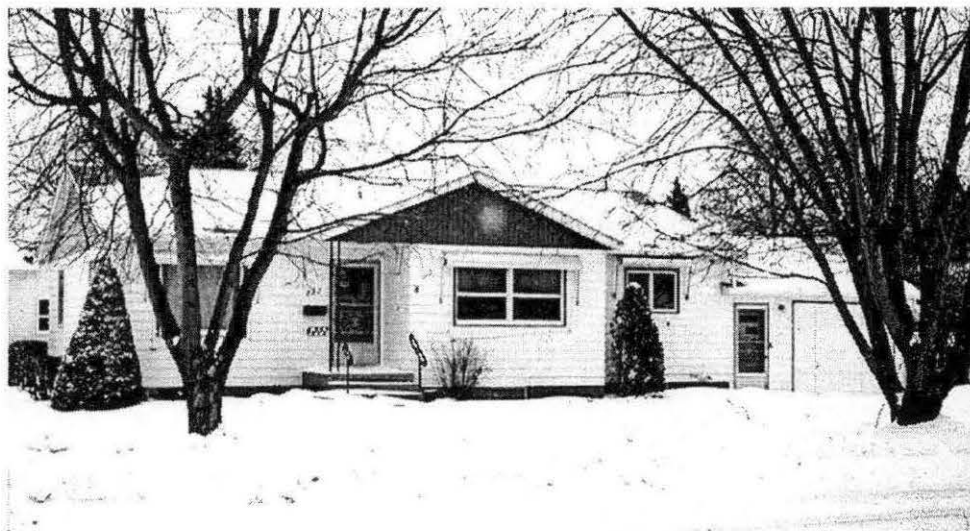


Figure 31. Van Laar house, 222 North Cedar, Canton, South Dakota.  
Photo by author.



Figure 32. Kappen house, 221 South Johnson, Canton, South Dakota. Photo by author.





Figure 33. Reinke house, 209 North Wicker, Canton, South Dakota.  
Photo by author.



Figure 34. Fostvedt house, 211 North Wicker, Canton, South Dakota.  
Photo by author.

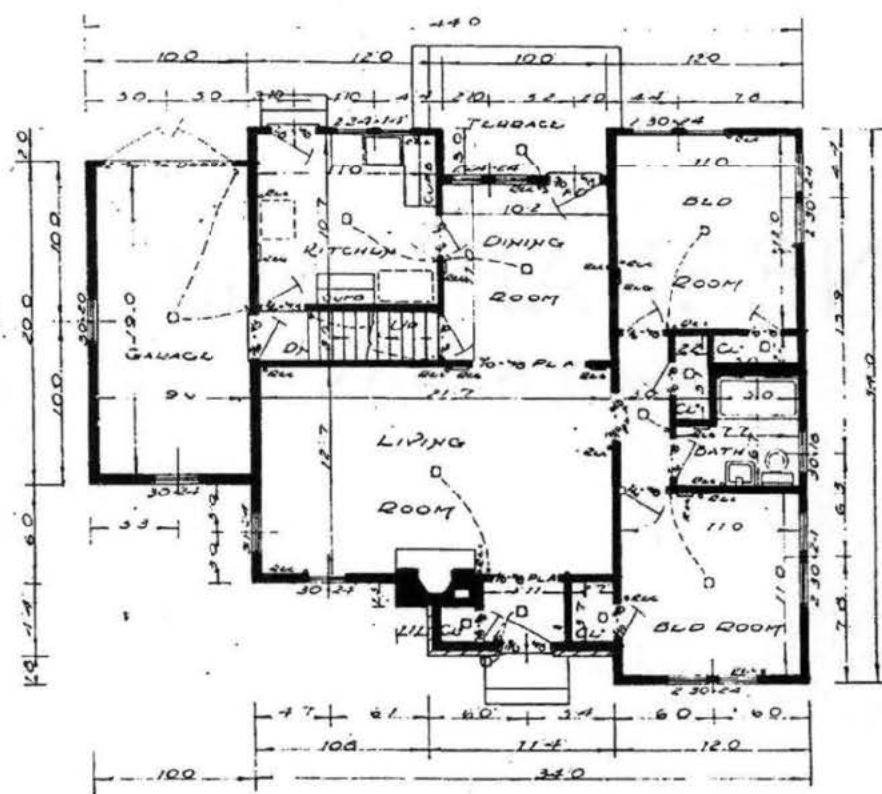


Figure 35. Rikansrud house, 28003 South Dakota Highway 11, Canton vicinity. Photo by author.





Figure 36. Garlinghouse plan #4750. Source: DeLuxe Small Homes, Second Edition (Topeka, Kansas: L.F. Garlinghouse Company, n.d.), 39.



FLOOR PLAN 5-10

Figure 37. Garlinghouse plan #4750 first level floor plan. The Fees modified the interior arrangement by moving the stairs to the lower left corner of the living room and constructing a wall between the living and dining rooms, resulting in an L-shaped living space. Plans courtesy of Esther Fee.

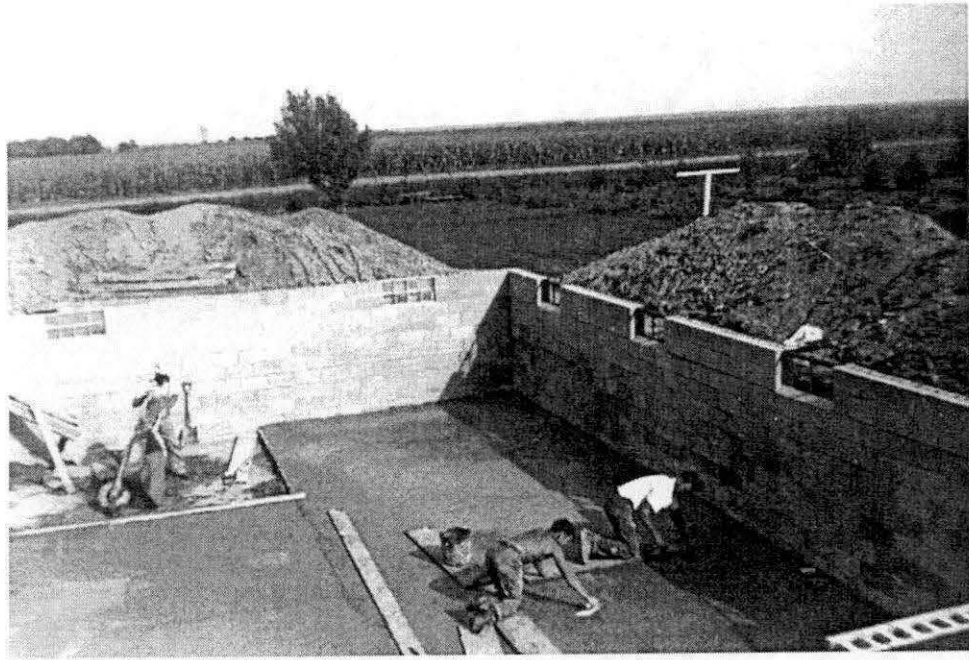


Figure 38. Rikansrud basement house under construction, 1952.  
Photo courtesy of Olive Rikansrud.

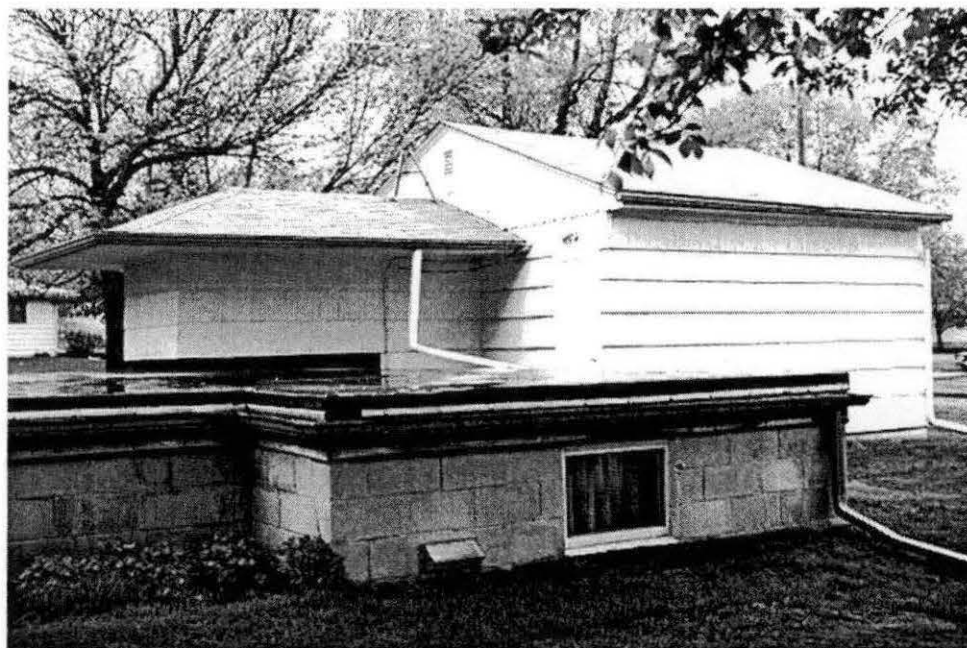


Figure 39. Fee basement house. Note size of windows, typical also of Skyberg basement house. Photo by author.



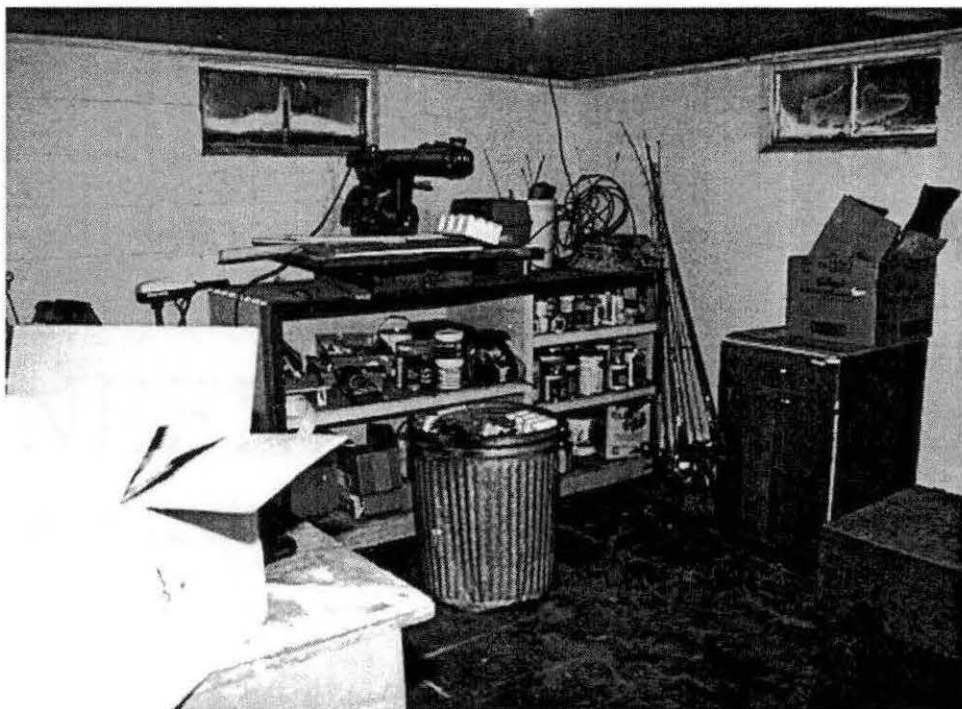


Figure 40. Tokle basement. Note windows, size of which are typical for several basement houses in Canton. Photo by author.



Figure 41. Rikansrud house superstructure under construction, 1954. Note shed entrance to basement house, partially obscured by framing. Photo courtesy of Olive Rikansrud.

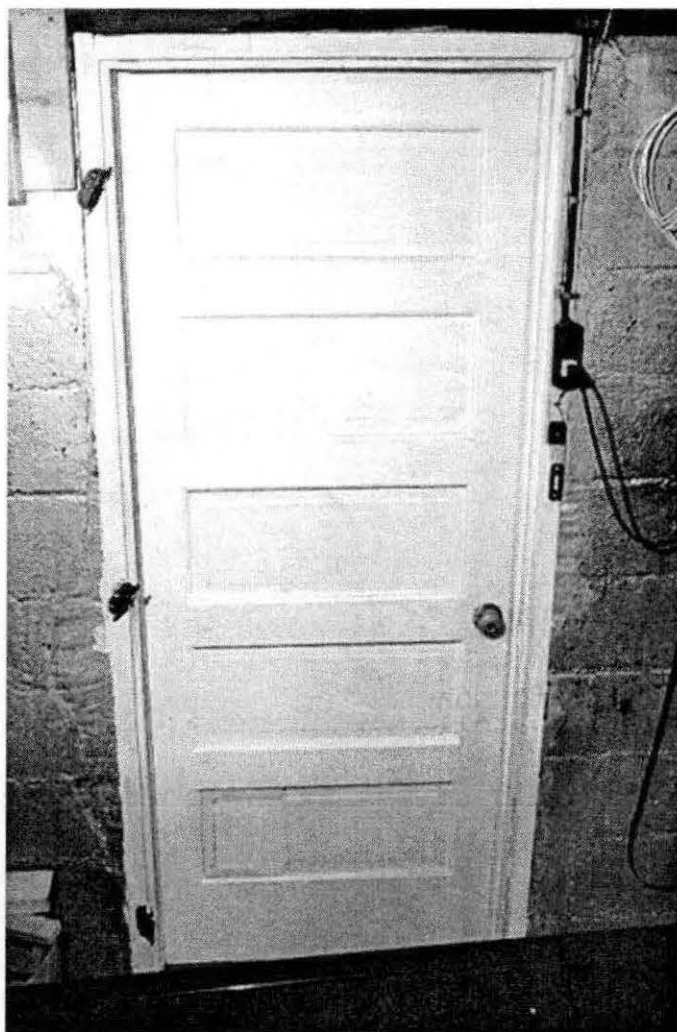


Figure 42. Entrance to Skyberg basement through garage. Note presence of historic doorbell under electrical outlet. Photo by author.

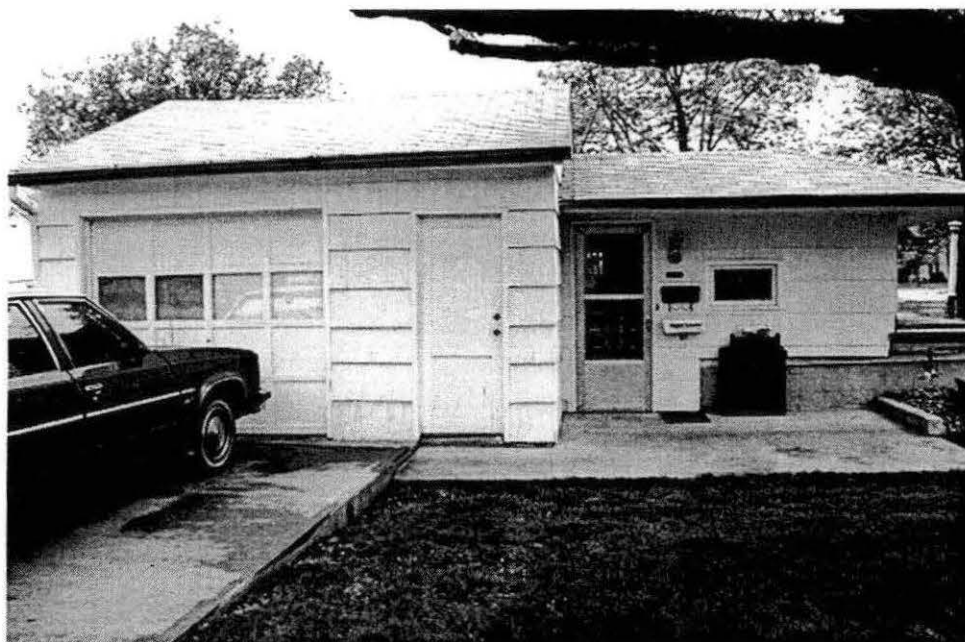


Figure 43. Fee garage. Photo by author.



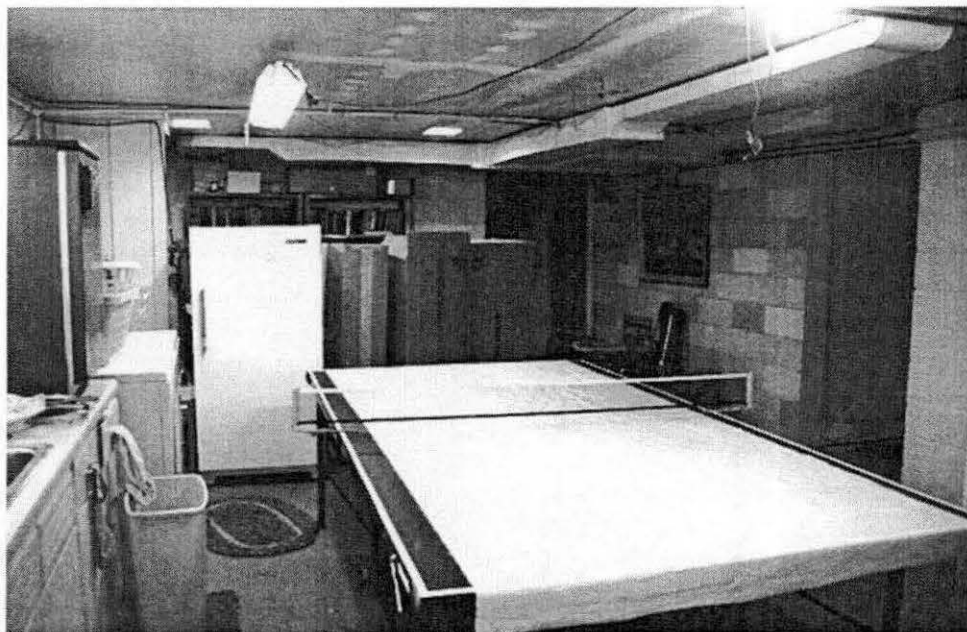


Figure 44 Concrete-block bearing wall construction in Skyberg basement. Photo by author.



Figure 45. Van Laar basement kitchen, looking to southwest.  
Photo by author.



Figure 46. Van Laar above-ground kitchen, looking to northwest.  
Photo by author.



Figure 47. Skyberg basement kitchen, looking to northwest.  
Photo by author.



Figure 48. Skyberg above-ground kitchen, looking to southwest.  
Photo by author.



Figure 49. Rikansrud basement kitchen. Photo by author.



Figure 50. Rikansrud above-ground kitchen. Photo by author.



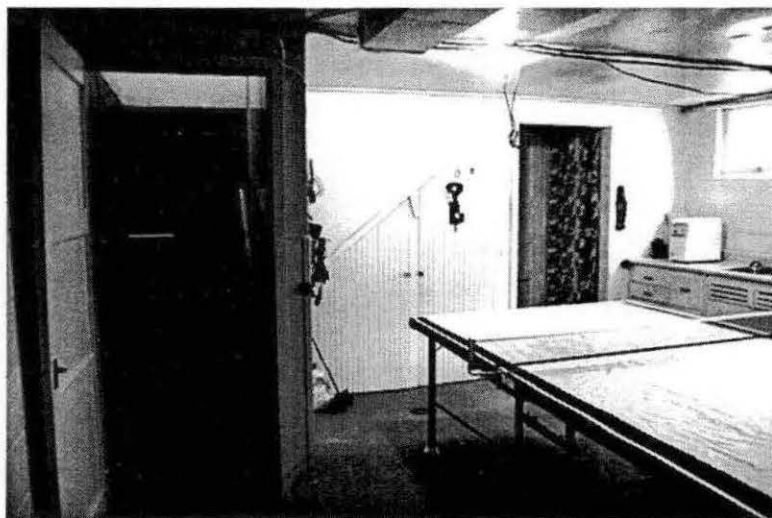


Figure 51. Skyberg main basement living area, a "rec room."  
Photo by author.



Figure 52. Rikansrud main basement living area. Note tip of shuffleboard court in lower center of picture. Photo by author.



Figure 53. Fee house living room, view to stairs from kitchen.  
Photo by author.



Figure 54. Fee house living room, view from base of stairs.  
Photo by author.

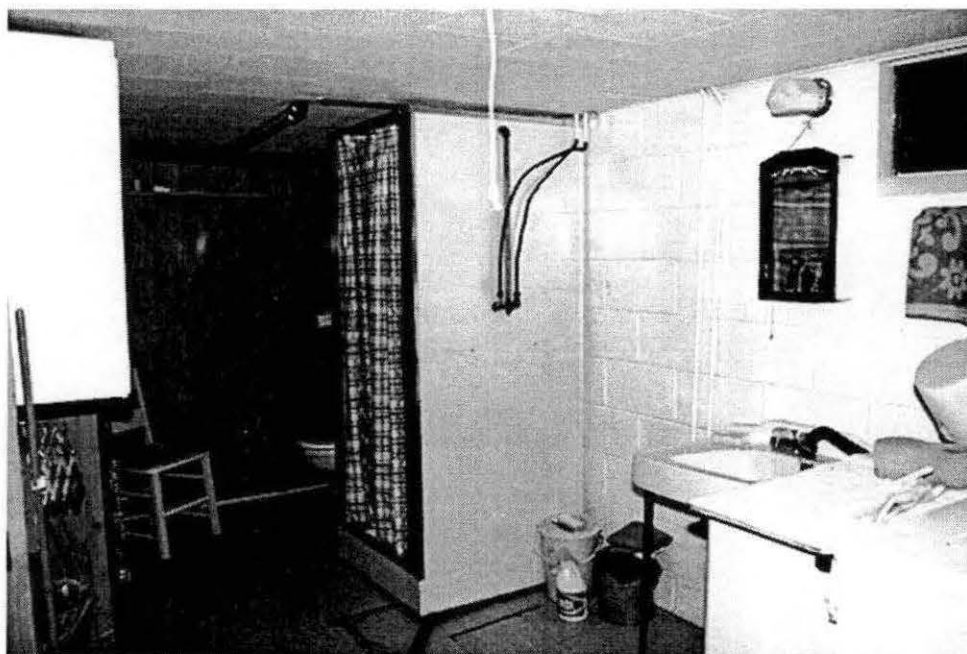


Figure 55. Rikansrud basement bathroom, part of laundry room.  
Photo by author.

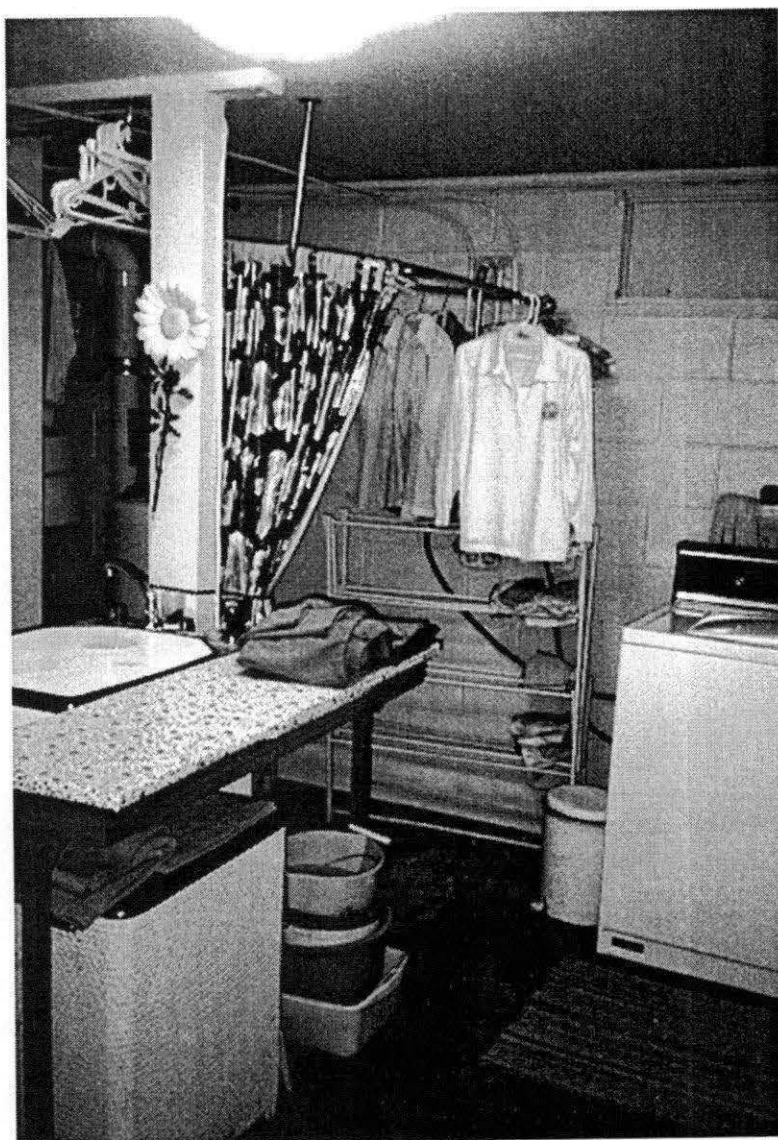


Figure 56. Van Laar basement laundry room. Note presence of original shower. Basement is adjacent to left wall of laundry room. Photo by author.



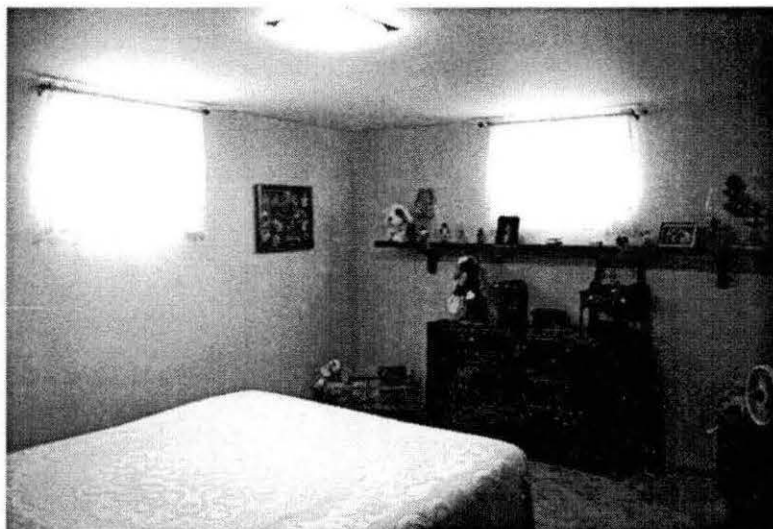


Figure 57. One of two bedrooms in Fee house. Photo by author.

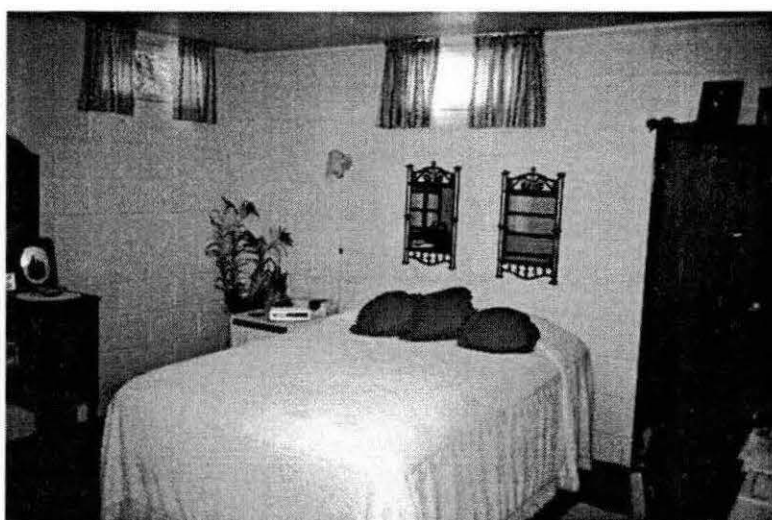


Figure 58. Van Laar basement bedroom. Photo by author.



Figure 59. Rikansrud basement bedroom. Photo by author.

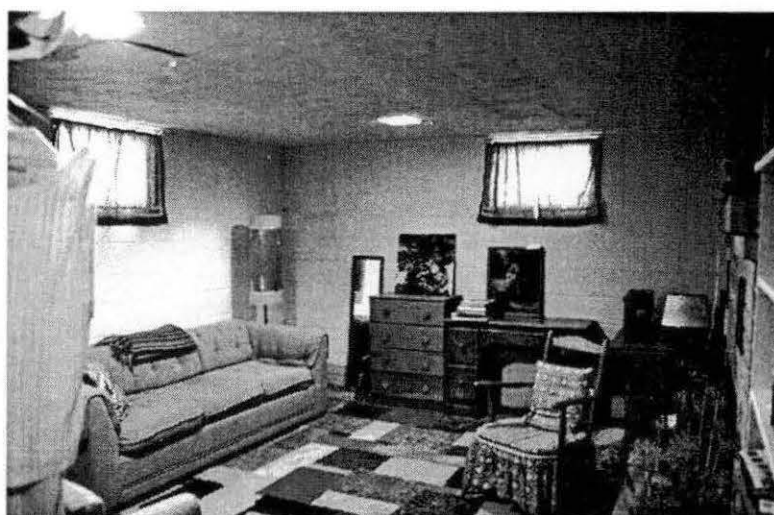


Figure 60. One of two original basement bedrooms in Skyberg house. Photo by author.



Figure 61. Central basement hallway in Van Laar house. Note door trim and ceiling moldings. Photo by author.



Figure 62. Van Laar basement living room. Photo by author.





Figure 63. Recycled door in Skyberg basement. Photo by author.

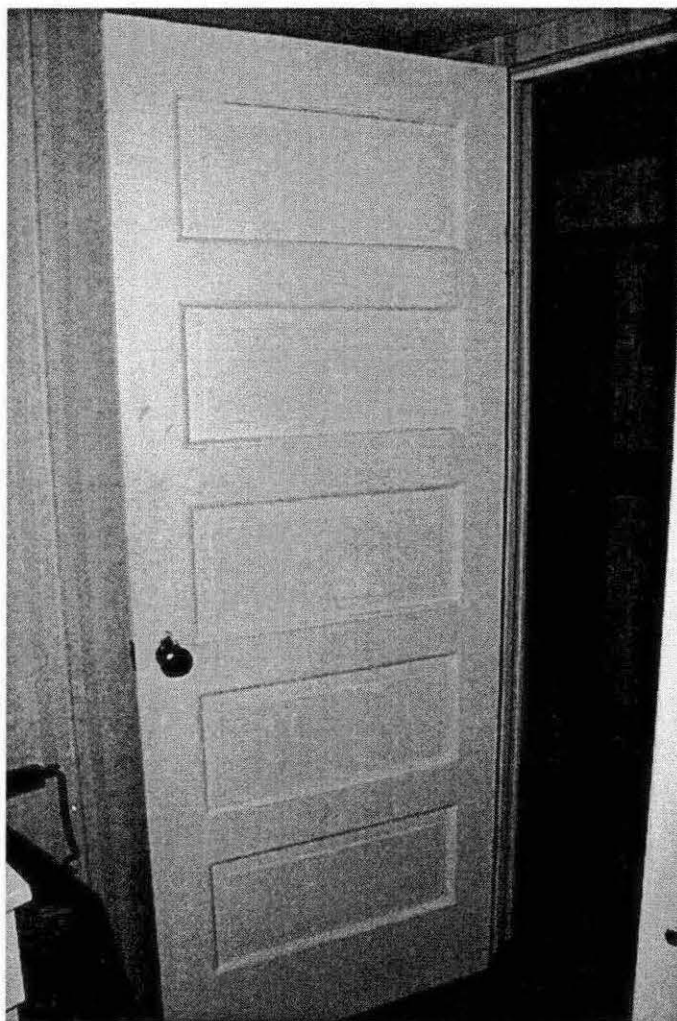


Figure 64. Recycled door in Togle basement. Photo by author.



Figure 65. Recycled door in Rikansrud basement. Note upside-down placement of door. Photo by author.

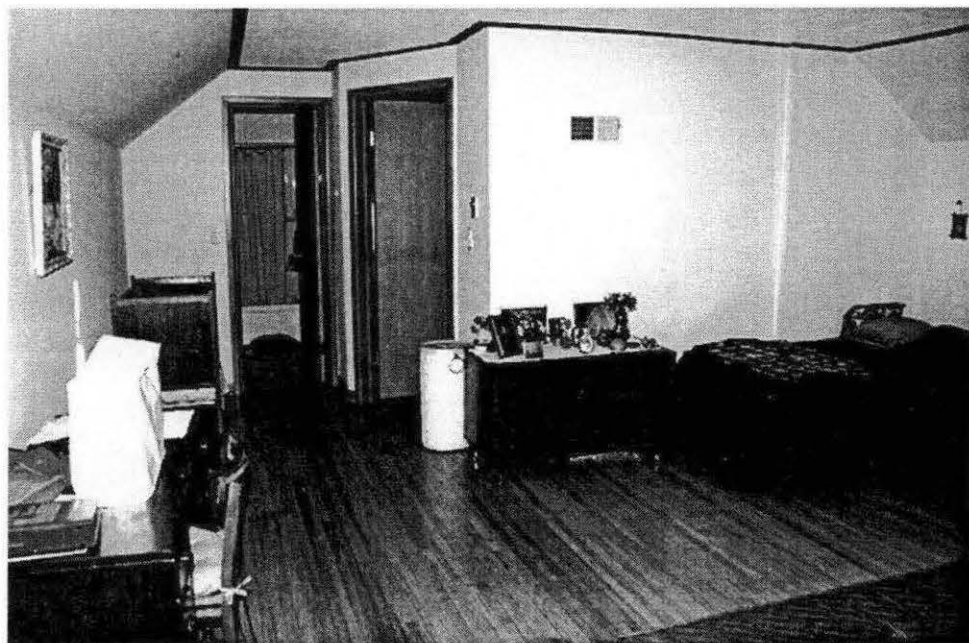


Figure 66. Attic level of Skyberg house, finished in 1961.  
Photo by author.





Figure 67. Skyberg above-ground fireplace. Note use of plywood in fireplace surround. Photo by author.



Figure 68. Rikansrud above-ground living room. Note folding partition at left edge of picture. Photo by author.



Figure 69. Basement house (c. 1910) in Hayes County, Nebraska.  
Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society State Historic  
Preservation Office.



Figure 70. Basement house in Hayes Center, Nebraska. Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society State Historic Preservation Office.





Figure 71. Basement house in Curtis, Nebraska. Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society State Historic Preservation Office.



Figure 72. Basement house at 1004 North Prairie Avenue, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Photo by author.



Figure 73. Basement house at 1304 Bennett, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Photo by author.



Figure 74. Basement house at 106 Washington, Elk Point, South Dakota. Photo by author.





Figure 75. Full-height elevation of basement house at 2200 South Hawthorne, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Photo courtesy of Sioux Falls Community Development office

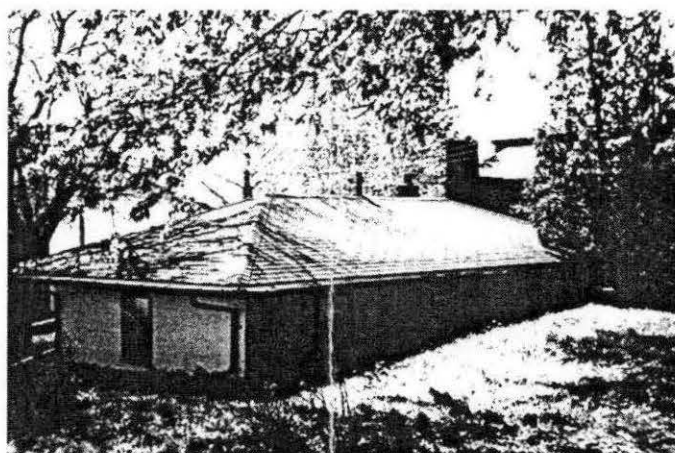


Figure 76. Basement house at 2200 South Hawthorne, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Photo courtesy of Sioux Falls Community Development office.



Figure 77. Neighboring basement houses at 1008, 1004 North Prairie Avenue, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Photo by author.



Figure 78. Basement house at 110 Park, Pierre, South Dakota.  
Photo by author.



Figure 79. Full-height elevation of basement house at 110 Park,  
Pierre, South Dakota. Photo by author.

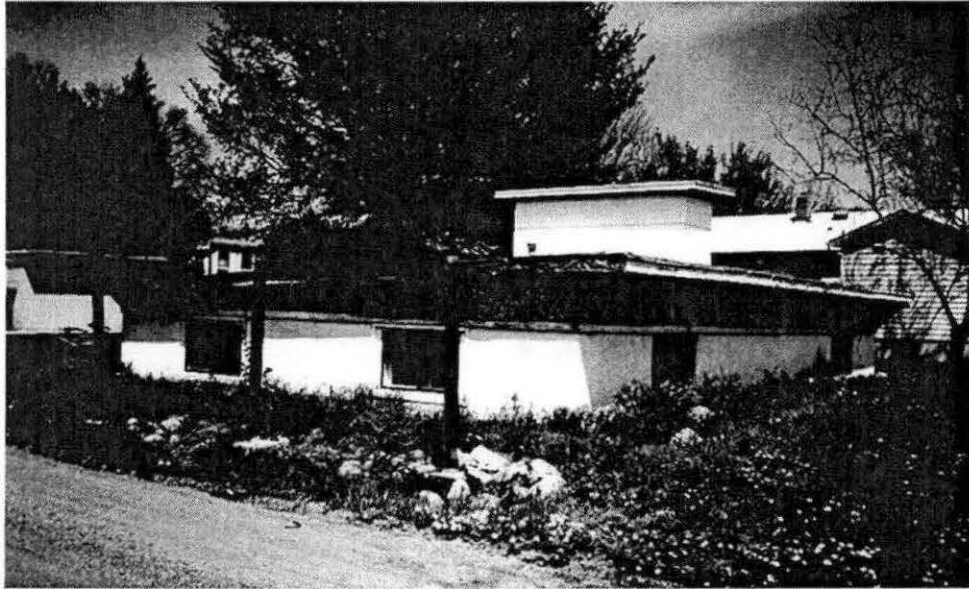


Figure 80. Basement house at 1508 Franklin, Pierre, South Dakota.  
Photo by author.





Figure 81. Staton half-dugout, northwest of Guymon, Oklahoma, 1906. Source: Charles R. Goins and John W. Morris, Oklahoma Homes Past and Present (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 33.



Figure 82. Fee basement house. The relationship of the basement house to the garage and entrance superstructure is a character-defining feature. Photo by author.



Figure 83. Flat roof of Fee basement house. Photo by author.



Figure 84. Fee kitchen. Photo by author.

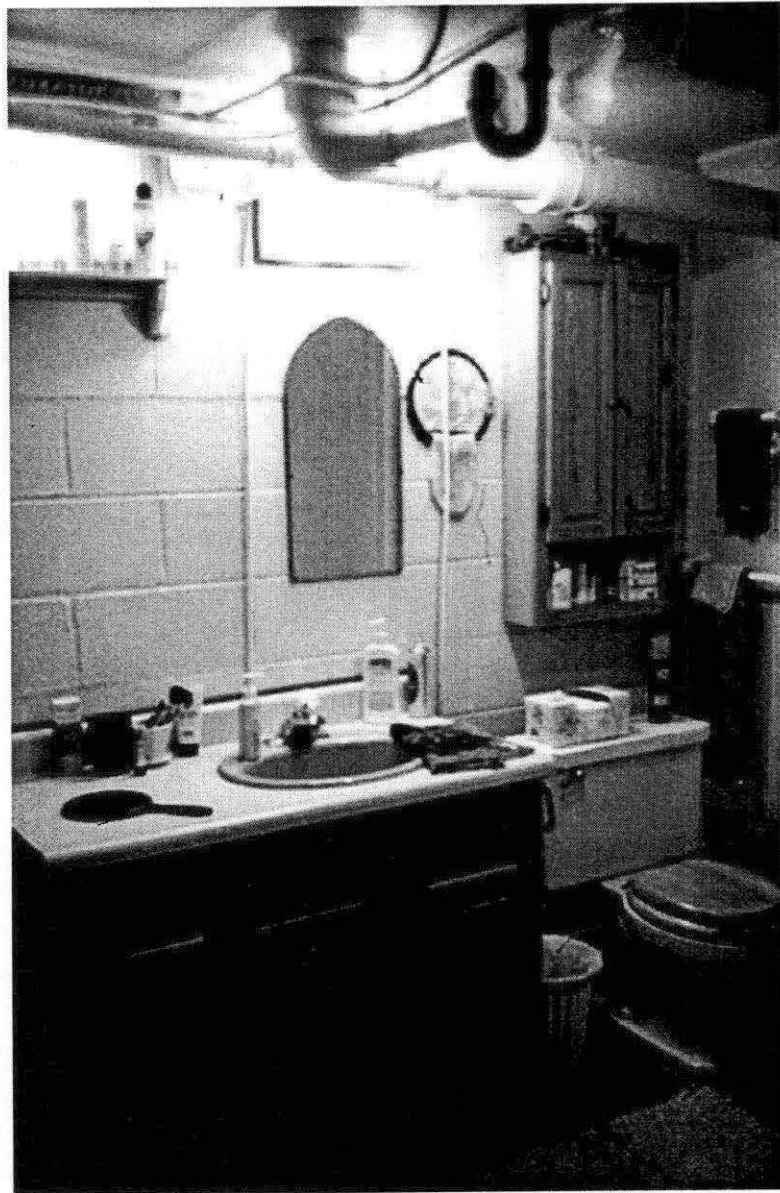


Figure 85. Van Laar basement bathroom. Photo by author.



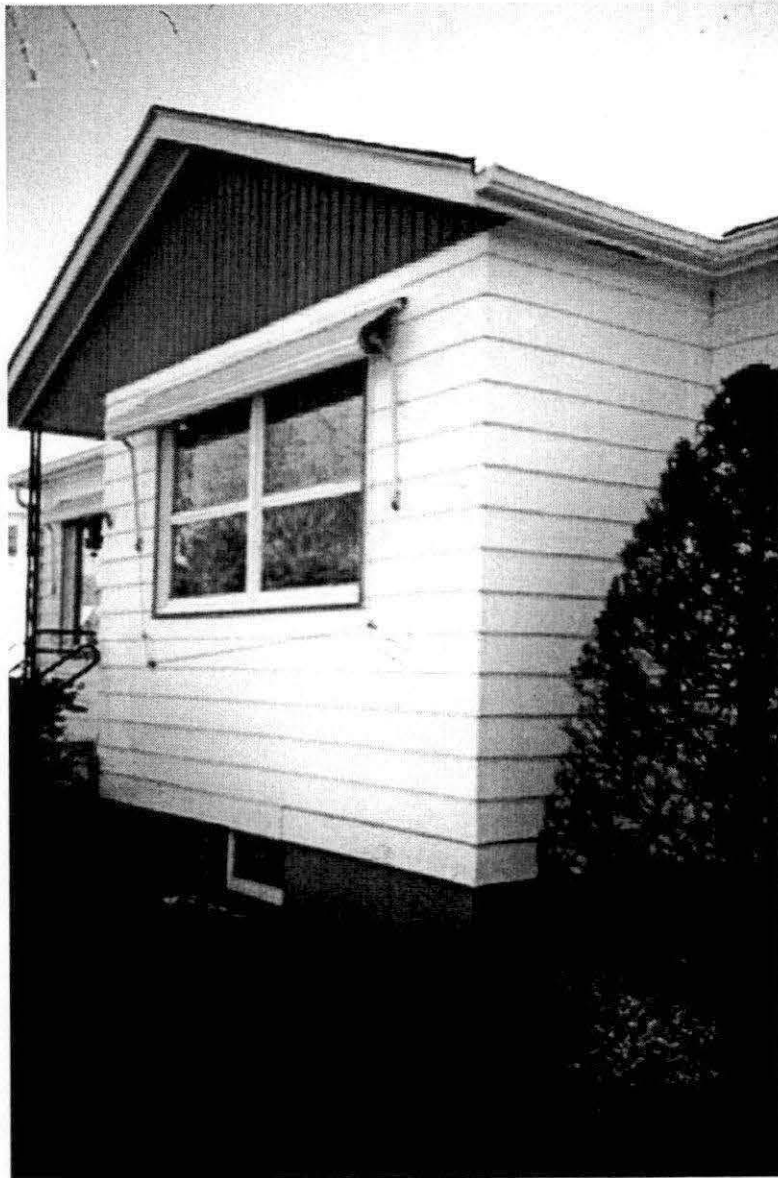


Figure 86. Van Laar house superstructure, built in 1960.  
Photo by author.

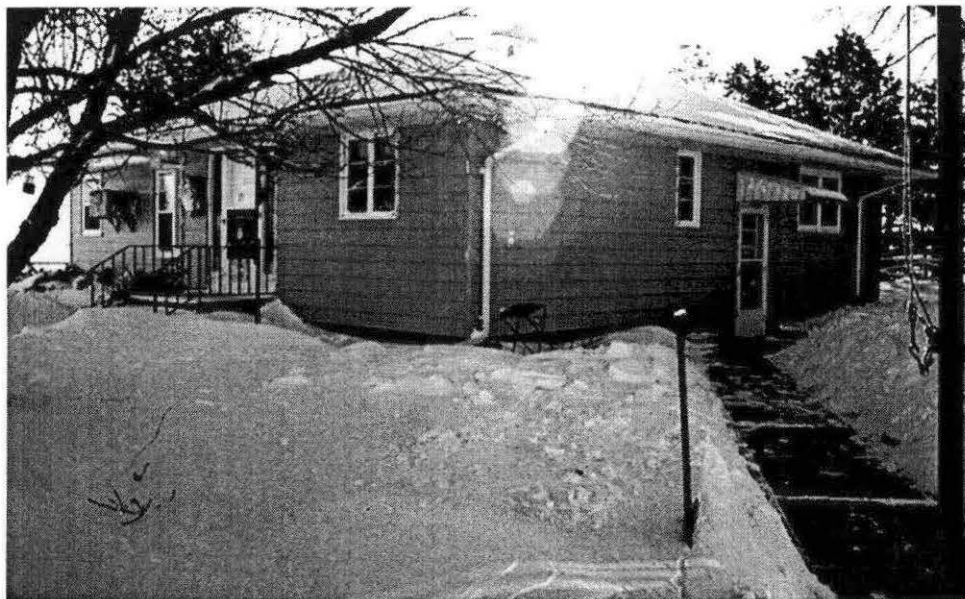


Figure 87. Exterior of Rikansrud superstructure. Note original basement entrance on right edge of picture. Photo by author.

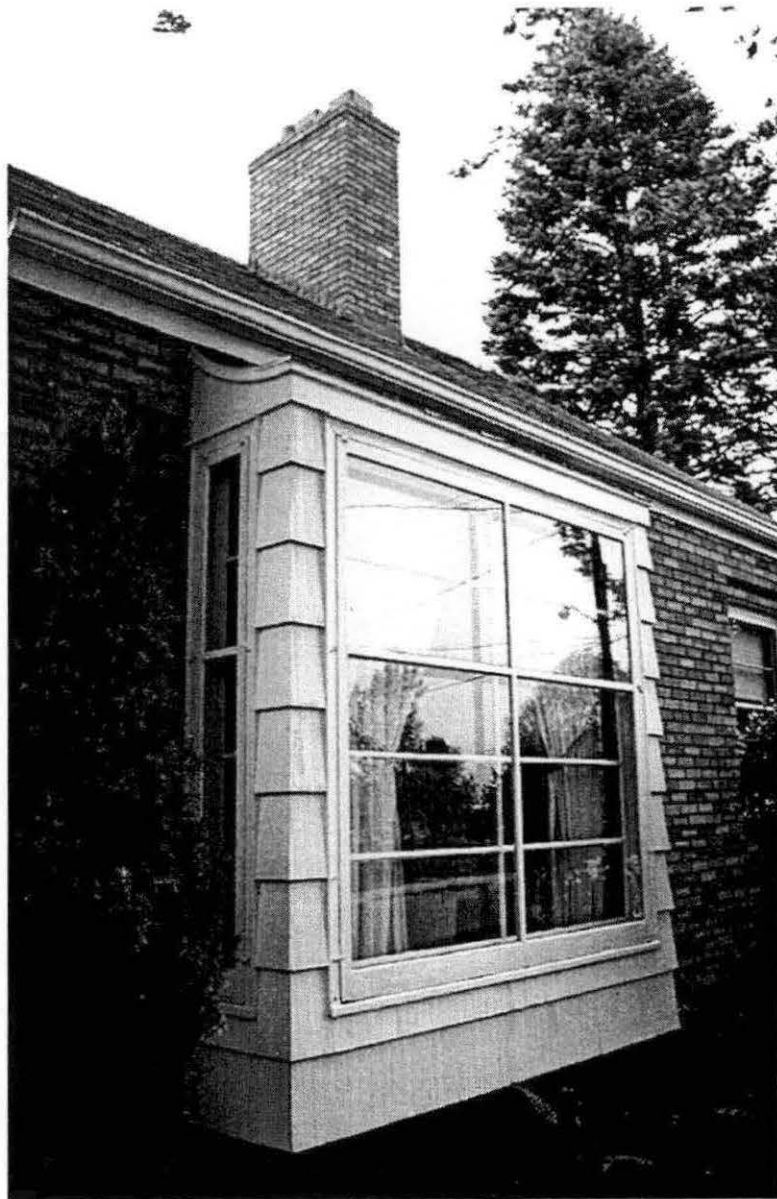


Figure 88. Detail of bay window, Skyberg superstructure.  
Photo by author.



Figure 89. Rear elevation, Kappen house superstructure.  
Photo by author.



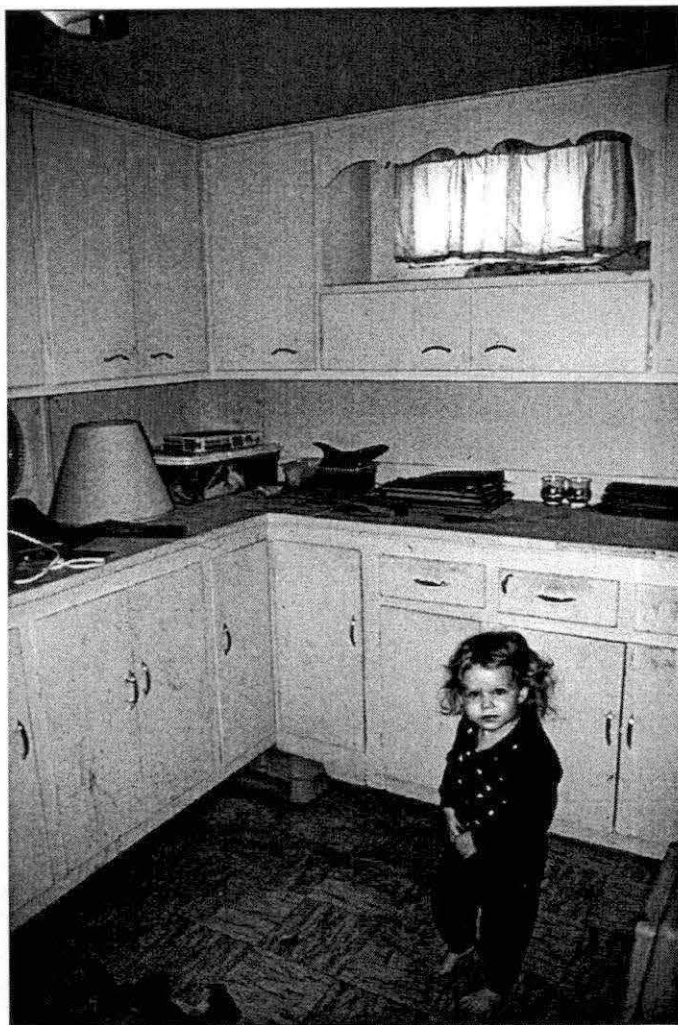


Figure 90. Kappen house basement kitchen. Photo by author.



Figure 91. Tokle house original basement entrance stairway.  
Photo by author.

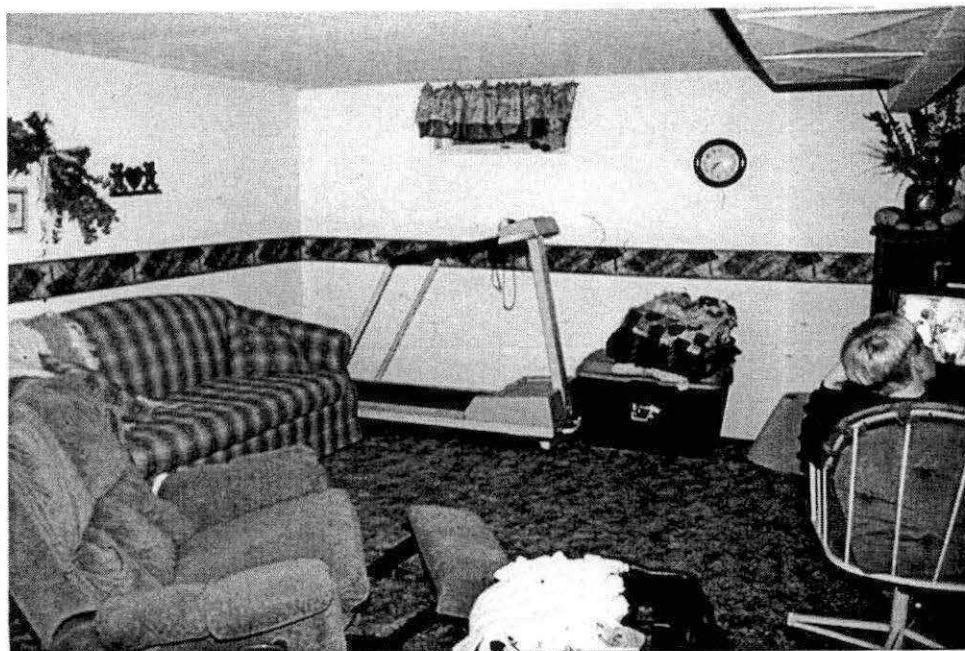


Figure 92. Recent remodel of Tokle basement living area.  
Photo by author.



Figure 93. Stairway in Fee basement house, an important character defining feature. Photo by author.





Figure 94. Rehabilitated World War II barracks in Canton, South Dakota. Photo by author.



Figure 95. World War II barracks at 1010 and 1012 East Fourth, Canton, South Dakota, divided and rehabilitated at the height of the postwar housing crisis. Photo by author.

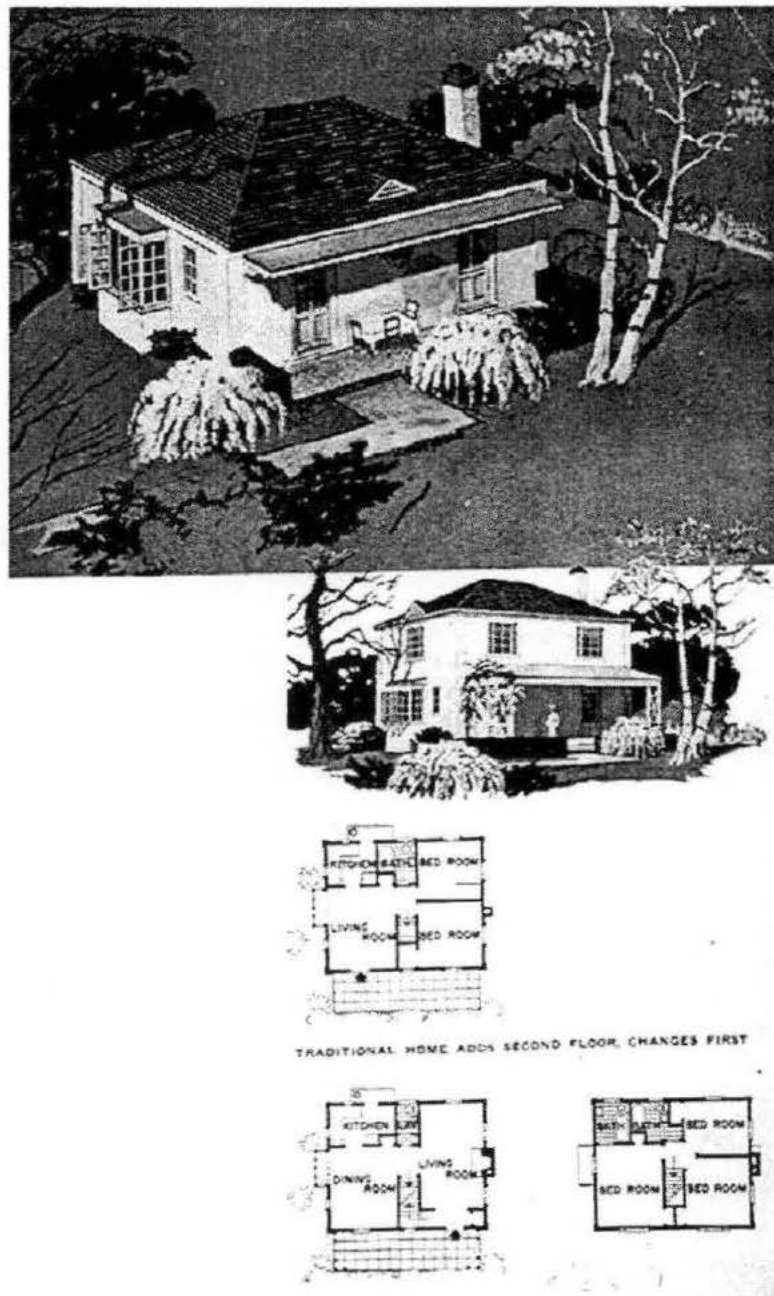


Figure 96. Scheme for a vertically expandable house. Source: "Some Like It Hot, Some Like It Cold," *Architectural Forum* (April 1945), 137.

APPENDIX B  
TRANSCRIPTIONS OF ORAL  
INTERVIEWS



Fitzer Interview

December 27, 1996

Erin Hanafin Berg: I guess if you could just start by telling me about the house, and when you built it and what the stages of construction were?

Lois M. Fitzer: Well, let's see. We must have built, we were married in '46, so we must have built it in '47, finishing it up in early '48, because Kris, whom you just met, when we brought her home from the hospital, why we brought her to the new house, which was just the basement. But it's not unusual now that the basement be fully insulated. It was then, and we, the cement blocks did have a granule insulation poured into them.

EHB: Oh, really?

LMF: Yeah. I didn't remember, you know, didn't think of that at the time, but I just remembered that in talking about it. So that on the three sides that were not, yeah, well, it was done on all sides I guess.

EHB: Right, but that one side was into the hill.

LMF: Yeah, hmm. Right. Into the hill. And it was really very comfortable there for the summer, I guess spring and fall were the worst times, because in the winter too it was a cozy warm place. The wind goes over and. . .

EHB: Not through.

LMF: Yeah. We must have lived down there at least two years, yeah, and then we finished it and moved in upstairs. Let's see, if she, Kris was born in '48, and then, so in '52, we were, we had moved upstairs in the spring of '52, so it would have been during the summer of '51 they were finishing the upper part of the house. Now the outside, they did all of that, but then we just finished the inside with the two bedrooms and bath and sun room. At least we called it a sun room, I guess today it's a three-season porch, but. . .

EHB: Oh, right, that's the room over the garage. . .

LMF: Yes, hmm. We finished that, I know we moved upstairs in about April of '52, and then, yeah, it would have been '54 then when my husband died, February of '54 I believe.

EHB: Now were you able to live in the basement part while they were building the top part on?

LMF: Yes, we did.

EHB: Was it loud?

LMF: Sometimes, yes. And there were times. . . Well actually, I think we moved pretty much up into the sun room, I mean we had the two cribs and a bed, a folding bed, in the sun room, would have been the Christmas of '51 probably.

EHB: So then you were kind of upstairs and kind of downstairs at the same time?

LMF: Yeah, cause we had to do our cooking and stuff downstairs, yes.

EHB: Do you remember, how did they take the roof off? You had a flat roof on the basement part, right? How did they take the roof off once they built the above-ground stories?

LMF: Well, you see, actually your roof then was your subflooring.

EHB: Oh, I see. OK.

LMF: They took the, I don't know, they took the tar paper off, and of course. . . They took the tar paper off, and then as the house went up, it was weather proof. I think maybe they just took the tar paper off a part at a time. So that we, yes we kept living there all the time.

EHB: The basement garage, you built that after the initial basement was built, is that right?

LMF: Yeah, probably six months. We built it and then realized that we could have a drive in, and wouldn't have to have a steep driveway, which we would have had otherwise. But, yeah, that was about six months later.

EHB: And did you continue to use the entrance that was above ground?

LMF: No. Once the garage was, we didn't use that one.

EHB: Did you take it off, or did you just leave it?

LMF: We just left it until we built. I think we ended up just kind of using the stairway as a little storage spot. You know, if there's a place to tuck something you put it there? Well like I said, we had, it's probably much the same as it is today, unless they took, they could have taken that temporary wall out and had just one big room by the fireplace, where we had a bedroom and a living room, and then there was the furnace room and bathroom, and then the big kitchen, dining room, whatever you wanted to call it, just one big room. Oh, you've got some pictures of the house.

EHB: I actually brought pictures to jog your memory a little bit.

LMF: OK, that'd be good.

EHB: So I thought you might. . . These aren't the most illustrative pictures, maybe, but you'll probably recognize. These are all of the basement. When I was there in Canton, you know this past week, I was remembering, wow, my grandparents have been here you know 35 years.

LMF: That's the basement, that's where you go out to the garage, go upstairs. Yeah, you probably remember it better than anybody (to Kris).

Kris: I just remember the kitchen and the shower in the bathroom. Oh there's, so they're using it still as a kitchen down there.

EHB: Well they left all of the fixtures in place, which is really, and actually the washer drains right into the sink, the plumbing is all in place. And so, I think my grandmother used to do canning and stuff down there.

LMF: Yeah, I used to do all the canning down there. Well now, they've paneled a room, haven't they?

EHB: Yeah they paneled, that was I think the bedroom.

LMF: Yeah, that looks like the window placement. Why that's interesting.

Kris: Those windows were pretty big in there, weren't they?

LMF: Yeah they were, I didn't realize. . .

Kris: Was there a fireplace down there too?



LMF: Yeah, hmm.

EHB: But that was built after, at the same time you built the above-ground fireplace, right?

LMF: Right. Howie Skyberg came down and did all the brickwork.

Kris: Oh. Well that's a pretty nice room down there then, isn't it. Do your grandparents still live there?

EHB: Hmm. Just my grandmother. My grandfather died four years ago.

LMF: Oh, he did. I wondered if he had, if that had happened. Ah, there we are, that's the furnace room and that's the bathroom, I'll bet.

Kris: I remember that shower. Big scary shower where the water comes down and hurts my back!

LMF: (Laughter.) Yes, that's it. Well that was interesting to see that part.

EHB: And here's some photos of the rest of the house, too, if you'd like to breeze through those.

LMF: Oh yeah, they've got paved streets, curb and gutters.

EHB: Now when you built that house, it was pretty much like on the edge of town, right, there weren't many other houses nearby.

LMF: They've added another garage.

EHB: They did that I think in the mid-'70s.

LMF: And then there's a deck above it. Okay.

EHB: The deck actually has been redone since that photo was taken, because they were having terrible problems with leaking.

LMF: Yeah, this used to be a rose garden.

EHB: Oh, in front?

LMF: Hmm-hmm. And they've added the wrought iron railings and stuff. Those are nice. Well, it's fun to see pictures of it now.



EHB: They've taken pretty good care of it. You know, there's, done very few changes, other than cosmetic things like wallpaper and carpeting and stuff, but. . .

LMF: Well the stone sidewalk still looks pretty good. Oh I see, this is the southwest corner, cause there's the deck. Now where is the piano? Is that what I used for a dining room?

EHB: I think so. And then they actually used what you called the sun porch as the dining room. Kind of a dining room and family room combined.

LMF: Oh yeah. This looks familiar. Oh, the towel bar, the ladder bar.

EHB: I love that bathroom.

LMF: OK, I used to have the refrigerator there.

EHB: Where that desk is.

Kris: Oh, you have upstairs pictures too.

LMF: Yeah. I'll have to go back here a ways and. . . Here, take these where the outside ones start.

Kris: Oh and there's a garage outside.

LMF: See they've got an extra garage stall now, which we all need.

Kris: Oh, somebody had these pictures of the basement house?

EHB: Oh, that's a different basement house.

LMF: Oh, I didn't get all the way through those I guess.

EHB: That's the one that's on North Dakota, the main drag going north out of Canton.

LMF: Oh, I see. Oh yeah, this is where you said dining room/family room and this is our old. . . Now what do you have for the, what do they have for heat out there?

EHB: They have a little portable heater actually. They don't use it at all in the winter because it gets so cold. But there was a little electric fireplace in there for a long time and now I think they just have space heaters. So, but it was

very chilly.

LMF: Then of course we never had these upstairs.

Kris: No, upstairs was never done. Oh they put a deck out there.

LMF: Okay. Now, do you have any more questions?

EHB: I do, actually. What was it that prevented you from building the whole house right from the outset?

LMF: Well, it was a matter of not wanting to go deeply in debt. So that it was just, in fact the, all the basement part was paid for before we started the upstairs. And then, we, as I said, the exterior was finished, and then we just finished the interior of the first floor, with the idea that we would finish it then. Because I had, what, a set of bunk beds and one other bed, and so all three children were in one room. So it wouldn't have been too long till we would have finished the upstairs.

EHB: You didn't continue to use the basement as bedrooms then, once you moved upstairs?

LMF: I don't think we, even you know having guests, needed or did use it. It was very usable, but we just didn't. See what was it, Kristy was, she was four when we moved upstairs, yeah. They were, yeah, they were four and two and then Ken was born after we moved upstairs. So that we, really, as a complete family, only lived in it about a year. And then Vern died, and it was, the kids and I continued to live in there a short time, a couple more years. I think it was a total of 11 years that I lived in Canton.

EHB: You didn't grow up in Canton then?

LMF: No, uh-uh. No, I'm from southern Iowa, southwestern Iowa.

EHB: And you said you got the idea of a basement house?

LMF: I think we had seen some in Sioux Falls. I don't think we'd ever been in them, we just found this plan we liked, and saw how we could work out to make a living quarters out of the basement, and we did. So, like I said, during the summer it was quite comfortable being in the basement.

EHB: Now did you have to do any, obviously the plan was not drawn with the basement, you know including. . .

LMF: That outside door was not in the plan, it was for a regular lot. And with the topography of that lot, why we put in, first we put in a whole bunch of fill, and then took it out. And put the garage in then. And it was nice to be able to walk in and out regular, not have to go up and down stairs all the time.

EHB: And now did, how did you determine like then where the bedrooms would go and where the kitchen was, did you just borrow that from the upstairs plan?

LMF: Yes, uh-huh, so that we didn't have to do lots of plumbing change. And then when we, oh, I guess all the time I lived there, my washer was in the corner of the furnace room, and the dryer was out next to the ah, oh the cabinets that were in the kitchen area. Now I presume that the washer has been moved out in that area too. Well, we did do the stone wall before we finished the upstairs. We had picked that, it's called Kasota stone, it's up near Mankato, there are a lot of these lime quarries? And they have what they call, I guess they called it rubble. We could go in and pick pieces we wanted, and we picked up enough of that. And then, when we finished the sidewalk and stuff, then we bought regular Kasota stone and finished that up. But I mean, it's all the same stone, it's just that we made use of the lesser, the less expensive to do the wall.

EHB: But did you do the wall then before the upstairs was done, but then do the sidewalk and steps once you'd constructed the. . .

LMF: Sidewalk and steps was done at the same time as the two fireplaces went in.

EHB: Now do you remember if there were any building restrictions or anything after the war that. . .

LMF: No, I don't think there were any restrictions. Those have come in later years.

EHB: And did they use steel at all in the. . .? I mean like, how did they. . .

LMF: No, it's all, the basement walls are cement block, and then it was just lumber, your wood. . . I think the wood joists were 2 x 10s, I know they were very, it was a very. . . These builders have this reputation of building very well, and everything was built pretty strongly.

EHB: Now that was the Roti brothers, you said? So they built the basement part as well as the upstairs part?



LMF: Yes, uh-huh. Yes, they did.

EHB: Great. Now I found at my grandmothers house, she still has three, three of the like six or seven pages of drawings, the rest had been thrown away, but I found the name of the architect. . .

LMF: Oh, you did?

EHB: Yes, it was a guy named Maurice Thornton, I believe, out of Indianapolis?

LMF: Yes. Yes that's right.

EHB: So, hopefully, you said that you didn't remember the magazine. . .

LMF: Well, there was something. . . Small Homes Guide. That's what I. . . I don't know, it just popped in! Yeah, Small Homes Guide was the name of the magazine.

EHB: OK, and it was a magazine rather than like a book?

LMF: You mean a monthly magazine, no. It was a softcover book. Cause they came out with a lot of, maybe they had previously, you think it's a brand new thing when you know you're suddenly interested and you start seeing them. Yeah, it was a probably a newsstand book, I would call it. It was about so. . . Well, like a Better Homes and Gardens.

EHB: Yeah, I was really pleased to come across the plans. They're not in very good shape. . . Now had you, you and Vernon were married in 1946, you said? So had you found the house plans shortly after you were married?

LMF: Yeah, I think so. Probably within the year we were looking. Because we were living in some bedrooms of a local house, and sharing their refrigerator and their bathroom and. . . So that's, you know, we were eager to get to a place of our own, so that's. . . And there wasn't much available, because there hadn't been building during the war. There was a real housing crunch.

EHB: Do you remember what kind of building was going on at the same time you started building the house? Were there other buildings being built in Canton?

LMF: Yeah, hmm, the Freeman's were, he was the veterinarian, and they were building, in fact, we would, they were, the builders were working back and forth, because you know they sometimes would have to wait at one place



before they finished. . . They'd do a certain amount, and then go to the other place, and there gets to be a little bit of, what, a little competitive as to who is going to have them this week. But we did get it finished.

EHB: Now you had said before that there was another basement house in Canton, too?

LMF: Yes, but I can't remember where it was.

EHB: Well, I think it may have been like on Fourth street, but it would be south of your place about four blocks and over east just about a half a block.

LMF: No.

EHB: That doesn't sound right?

LMF: I thought it was farther west than that.

EHB: Well, the third house is the one, the picture that you saw that's just still a basement.

LMF: Oh, it is still a basement?

EHB: It is still a basement. And that was, I think, on like Second and North Dakota, so that would have been about the same distance in the opposite direction.

LMF: Yeah. Now where did you say the other one was you're talking about?

EHB: The other one was on fourth and. . .

LMF: See we were on second, weren't we? Second and Kidder?

EHB: First and Kidder.

LMF: First and Kidder. And that was on fourth, fourth and what?

EHB: It was about a half a block in, I think, from Kidder. A half a block east of Kidder.

LMF: I'm trying to figure out where that was. Maybe if I were in the town I could.

EHB: I'm not sure about that one yet, either, I have to still verify, but that's

what I heard. But it seems that that house was also, like the top was put on at about the same time that you were constructing the top portion of your house. I was wondering if that was coincidence or. . .

LMF: Probably knew the people, but I, we apparently were not very close to them or I would have remembered. I remember in rain one time, the, you know the window wells, around the basement windows, filling up with water and one wasn't latched, and the window pushed in, it was just like Niagara Falls coming into the room. Wow.

EHB: I can imagine.

LMF: Oh. So that was one of the, I made sure when I closed windows that I latched them afterwards.

EHB: Now, so you say that living in a basement wasn't all that bad, really.

LMF: No, it wasn't.

EHB: I mean, it's plenty light down there.

LMF: It was. I know there were people who commented that boy, they wouldn't do that. And you get that from your doing something that's out of the ordinary. But I was happy for having done it, because we ended up with a nice house by doing it that way. And like I said, spring and fall was when your, the temperature wasn't comfortable. Winter it was cozy and summertime was nice and cool. And I can remember being happy to go outside for a while and get into the sunshine, but more for the warmth than anything. But, it wouldn't be any worse than your earth houses they were building a few years ago.

LMF: I do remember after we were in the upstairs, and the oldest son. . . Well, we were sitting at the supper table eating, and I said to the oldest son, "Would you go down and get the cookies out of the deep freeze." And he got up from the table and walked over to the basement door, and then he turned around and looked at me, and said, "You mean that bag with the crumbs in it?" (Laughter). See how convenient the walkout basement was—he and his friends had eaten all the cookies. So, and we had a, we had a play area there, we had a fence built, so that the kids could go out from the basement, and play without worrying about them getting into the street or anything, because you couldn't keep track of them like in a house, you know, you look out the windows. So I don't know of what else, have you thought of anything else you might want to know?

EHB: Well I'm trying to think: Do you remember basement houses in other areas that you've lived since then or before then? Were there any in Luverne?

LMF: I guess I don't remember any. I just, I really don't.

EHB: But you remember several in Sioux Falls.

LMF: I remember seeing some in Sioux Falls, yes.

EHB: And now, was Vernon in the military?

LMF: He had been, yeah. That's where I met him. Wright Field, in Ohio. And I was a civil service clerk. So that. . . Yeah, he was there, he was in service three years. And we, he was discharged, and we were married in the spring of '46.

EHB: But you didn't, you didn't qualify or didn't use the VA loans that they had established through the GI bill? Hadn't they?

LMF: No, we didn't. I know we had the GI Insurance, but I think we. . . I know when we built the basement, we borrowed some money from his father. But we had that paid off when we started the upstairs. And then we had, our loan was through the savings and loan. Cause after Vern died, I worked at the Savings and Loan a couple days a week. But that's. . . I don't know why we didn't. I guess he just, this was the way he wanted to do it, that's all I can think of. Oh, this is the other one you're. . . And you say that's still a basement house?

EHB: That's still a basement, yeah. And she had built it after having seen yours. Tommy and Esther Fee?

LMF: Yeah, I recognize the name.

EHB: But, I don't know when Tom died, but I think it was like in the early '80s perhaps, and she's lived there. . . She still lives there to this day.

LMF: In the basement.

EHB: In the basement, yeah.

LMF: Really?

EHB: And they, she had found the plans too, for the house that they had



intended to build, and it was something out of Kansans City I think, or Topeka maybe, someplace in Kansas. And, but she said, you know, that they thought that they'd never be able to afford to put the top on top, you know that they. . . They didn't think that they'd have the money, so it was clearly, you know, an economic reason that they had built the basement.

LMF: Well, I mean that was our way of. . . And then by then we had had some equity in it, by the time we finished the top. I'm sure it would have, we would have gotten it done, I mean, things were going pretty well, and then of course he had cancer, and that was it.

EHB: What did Vern do for a living?

LMF: He and his father had the Chevrolet Buick agency. He sold cars. He, well, he had worked as a Chevrolet district manager in his young. . . you know, before he went into the military. Where you, they would travel over around and visit various dealerships. And then after he got out of there, he wanted to go into business with his dad, they worked it out and that was it.

EHB: Do you have friends or relatives from that time that you lived in Canton that still live there?

LMF: Not really. I have some people we, there are two couples that we used to be with a lot in Canton, one lives in up in Brookings now, the Ostrups, he had been the county agent at the time we were there. And we still exchange Christmas cards. And then the fellow who had been, well he came in as the coach and then he became the principal. They now live out in Michigan. The Ostrups and the Johnsons. Well now, if Clarion White, I wonder if they're still in town. I know Bryants, he died, and I don't know about her. She had moved to Sioux Falls, where her daughter was. And the, there was a doctor friend there, but they've moved out of Canton, too. And relatives, they're gone. So that pretty much is it. Cause I don't even have, you know, not one on the Christmas list. So I've really gotten away from that part of the, of the country, or that part of my life, except for three little kids that are all grown up. (Laughter.) So. . . Well there was nothing, yeah, we, you know, we did our entertaining and being with friends just like we were living in a house at ground level, so. . . And we were both real glad that we were able to continue with our plans and move up when we did. You know, you don't always get to do, your timetable doesn't always work out like you want it to. And I think the rest for the house would have been finished, but your grandparents finished it, and I think they did a nice thing with it upstairs.

EHB: They, I guess when they had finished it, they had done it with the intention that it could become an apartment if they needed to. So they only



actually like made the divisions for one bedroom, and then left like the rest as kind of a large seating area, I guess, and then a bathroom. But it's turned out that they never had to really use it that way, so I think they ended up kind of. . .

LMF: Well it, of course with the door to the stairway so close to the front door, it would have worked. Well that's good.

EHB: Do you know if you have any pictures from when your children were small, that may have like a portion of the house in the background or anything like that?

LMF: Yeah, there should be, cause I can kind of remember taking some first day of school pictures. I would have to go hunting.

EHB: Well if you, once you get back from Texas, if you feel up to it, not too vacationed out or anything. It would be really helpful to me to be able to see it as the basement, and to have a photograph or two or at least a part of. . .

LMF: Well I don't know if I have anything of the basement, I really don't. Because by the time they started school, we were already upstairs.

Kris: Looking for a box of pictures?

LMF: Have you got some?

Kris: I had a box. Don't know what's in it. I just inherited it.

LMF: I know, from grandma.

Kris: Let me go see what's in it. Or no, I'll just bring it up.

LMF: I'll bet when she started piano lessons, we were, the piano was in the basement. I never had it upstairs at Canton. And she started piano when she was in second grade.

EHB: That would have been seven or eight?

LMF: Hmm. So her first year at the piano would have been in the basement then. Cause I know she was in one recital in Canton. They all have taken piano lessons.

Kris: There are two boxes there, Mother.

LMF: That's Vern. Canton Lutheran Church. That would be, there he is. Service pictures. Oh my. What have we here? Oh here's, here's a picture. . . That would have been our first Christmas in the bay window there.

EHB: I love that window.

LMF: I did. I like that window.

EHB: It's a great place for a Christmas tree, too.

LMF: Hmm. Always. Well I guess these are just. . . Here, Vern's growing up years.

EHB: Now he grew up in Canton, right?

LMF: Hmm, yes. That was me in 1945. Well, I don't know if we're going to find anything or not.

EHB: Vern must had gone to St. Olaf, then?

LMF: Yes. Well, I don't think there are any pictures here. These look like letters she had probably gotten from him. See we weren't married until he was out of service. Grandma was a saver. I haven't done a very good job of that. No, I guess they don't have the pictures. Well, Kristy thought she had something, but she didn't.

EHB: Well, hopefully I can get something elsewhere.

LMF: Well I doubt that I have any pictures of the basement, but I might have some of the kids in front of the house when they were starting school.

Fee Interview

January 11, 1997

Erin Hanafin Berg: Could you start by just kind of telling me when you built the house and how it came to be?

Esther H. Fee: Well, we moved in in September '48. And all we had was a bathroom and four walls. And from that time on we built on and added and put in and finally got the walls and everything the way we wanted them. My husband built the cupboards, and then he replaced them, built them.

EHB: So these cupboards that are here now are the second set of cupboards?

EHF: He came from a farm, and it's rather strange, you know farmers work with big lumber, and when he built the first ones, they were built with a little heavier wood than what cupboards are built of. Oh, the doors weren't, but the main structure was, which I never did like. But we decided we were going to make the divisions and everything. It's somewhat like the blueprint, except in the entry—that is not like the blueprint, that's not in the middle of the wall like it should have been.

EHB: So like in the house the blueprint would be, I mean like if we were at ground level now, that's where the entry would be down to the basement? OK. Right where the refrigerator is.

EHF: Yes, and the front entry would be between those two beam blocks, practically it's where the heater, the heating is.

EHB: OK. But like the kitchen was originally in this corner over here. . .

EHF: And the dining room would have been here, and then two bedrooms in the back.

EHB: Now you had picked the plans anyway because you liked the layout of



the rooms.

EHF: I liked the layout, right. And it took quite a few years. By the time we got the lawn in and trees planted and it's a large lot, and then we bought more land and more land. And now I wish we didn't have quite so much.

EHB: Yeah, you have to take care of it.

EHF: But that's the way it goes. But then when there's so much snow, I'm kind of glad we have it, so much of it, 'cause we have someplace to put the snow.

EHB: Yeah, that's true.

EHF: There's something to be thankful for, regardless. But basically we built it at the time to have someplace to live. We were renting, and it wasn't a very comfortable place, so we built basically to move into it.

EHB: Now had all of your children been born by that time?

EHF: Yes. We had three boys, the oldest one was, when we moved in here, he probably was a freshman in high school. And the youngest was, I think he started second grade in Canton.

EHB: Now during the war you were not living around here though, right?

EHF: No, we were in San Leandro, California. We were there quite a while. And we possibly would have stayed there, because we were in a new home and everything. We possibly would have stayed there excepting my mother-in-law wanted my husband to come home and farm. And we decided, after we got home, we decided there were too many on that farm, I mean the brother was there, and the, always the bunch came home on Sunday and everything, and the old folks, father and mother, were there. And we decided that wasn't any way to be in farming. So we decided to get a place to live in for a while, and then finally we moved into this.

EHB: Do you remember what year it was that you moved back here? Was it immediately after the end of the war, or. . .

EHF: We moved back here in 1946.

EHB: OK. I found some really fascinating articles in the Sioux Valley News back from you know like the early 1940s, late 1945 and early 1946, talked about the extent of the housing crunch around Canton. You know, every, like every



week, practically, the editor had his little blurb about 'We really need to something to improve the housing situation in Canton.' Every week he said that.

EHF: Well, you know, they didn't, don't pay anything in Canton. It's surprising when you look around how many have these big homes that were built years and years ago. It's really, people remark about those big homes. In fact, they like to drive around there just to see those big homes. And of course, now they've been doing more to those homes, so they're looking like they're being preserved. One of the homes had a hospital in it, and it, then they, 'course, that was before that time. That was before the war. And we didn't have many doctors in Canton. In fact, our second child was born in one of these little hospitals out here. But we lost him, he was. . . But, I mean, it was two nurses that ran the hospital. I mean Canton is, it has improved, it hasn't grown that much, and of course we've lost our businesses in town, you might say, our grocery stores, or dime store, and. . . But otherwise, it's really a nice town. The kids always enjoyed the house. They had lots of friends that didn't bother them a bit to come and visit in a basement house.

EHB: Now, what gave you the idea of doing a basement?

EHF: Well, at the time, why, Vern Skyberg had built a basement house. And there was another basement house in town, I cannot remember where that was at all. And we decided if Vern Skyberg could live in a basement house, we could too. Of course his was built up into a house, it didn't stay a basement that long.

EHB: Well, it was about four years, that they were in the basement house.

EHF: Well, my sister-in-law lived in a basement house in. . . Of course, they'd keep buying and selling houses. And then they decided that here was this basement house and they could do what they wanted with it. And I walked in that house. . . Now, so many of the basement houses, they would shut off, have a wall for each room, which did make you feel like you were enclosed. But her house, you walked in and you could see most of the house, excepting the bedrooms and the bathroom. And I decided that, now that wasn't a bad house at all. It really wasn't, it was really nice..

EHB: Now this was before you built yours, or after?

EHF: Oh, before.

EHB: And where was this house, do you remember?

EHF: It was up in Sioux Falls. I'm sure it's, I know it's long gone, because, you know Sioux Falls isn't Sioux Falls anymore. It's gone, I mean, everything that used to be there is built up, and. . . So my boys went to high school here and graduated, and they're all out on their own, so I don't think living in a basement stopped them.

EHB: Now, you had said something about the garage, came after you built the basement.

EHF: My husband bought a garage, it was on another house. And unfortunately it stood there for two years before it was moved down here, so it wasn't on a house. It had three walls was all. And the rest he built. And then he rebuilt the entryway.

EHB: What had the original entry been like, was it, you know, like where it slanted down?

EHF: Slanted, yeah. And, definitely looked like a basement house. In fact, a relative of ours came from Minnesota, they were looking for the basement house, and they saw the entryway and the garage and they said, "No, that's not it," and drove right by.

EHB: Oh really. Wasn't what they were planning on, expecting to see.

EHF: They were expecting to see just that basement house. (Laughter.) Oh, we've had lots of fun in this house. Used to entertain all the relatives down here at Christmas time. Of course, at that time, you know, you didn't have quite so much furniture, and you didn't have the TV, so you had more room. We had many a good time down here at Christmas time and New Years. We always had our friends around on. . . All the family came, of course, now the family's grown so much too, that I don't think I could get them in here anymore if they were all here, but. . . Then they moved away too, so. . .

EHB: What do you hope will happen to this house?

EHF: Well, I'll tell you, when I move out, after that, I don't really care. But my son says that they'll surely bulldoze it, and what they will do is either build another house, or I think Olsteads could build a couple (laughter) if the city let 'em. There weren't any rules and restrictions at all in Canton years back, and now I think they restrict it a little too much, but then that's. . . They're trying to be like a big city, I think. You can't do this and you can't do that. But we built ours according to the blueprint and where it was supposed to be put on the lot, and we had a good surveyor, so he knew what he was doing. . .

EHB: Now do you remember, where did you find the plans for the house?

EHF: I think I saw the pictures of the houses in a book and I think we sent to them, sent for them to that company. And I'd have to have the blueprint here to tell you what company, but. . .

EHB: I think it was called Garlinghouse Plan Service. . .

EHF: Hmm, that's what it was, yes.

EHB: And then did they plan the house for your lot, I mean did they figure out where it should be located and all that? Was that the surveyor or somebody else that did that?

EHF: No, no. We could have bought the lot across the street, but I really didn't want my living room to the west, because they get kind of warm and. . . And so we bought this one instead, and with the blueprints showing the, I guess they aren't called blueprints, they're. . . but showed the size and everything, and from there kind of decided where to put the house.

EHB: Now do you remember who built the basement for you?

EHF: Mmm, no, I can't really. It was, they were different people here in town. there were a couple of men. . .

EHB: Does the name Harmelink sound familiar to you?

EHF: No, I wonder if he didn't start in afterwards. The roof was put on by someone else, though. See these two put the. . . We had a Johnson put in the sewer, he was putting in sewers, and I have to give him credit, it was put in right, 'cause we've never had any sewer problems in all these years. And then there was a couple other men that laid the blocks.

EHB: OK, so like the whole wall, exterior wall of this building, is concrete blocks, right, and then you plastered over it?

EHF: And they did put waterproofing on it, but I'm not sure the waterproofing was so great.

EHB: Did they insulate it, too?

EHF: Hm-mm.

EHB: No?



EHF: It hasn't been insulated.

EHB: But it's still pretty warm in here. I mean it's ten degrees below zero, and I can't tell.

EHF: Yeah. It's, the colder it gets the warmer my house gets. The only time when you wish the furnace would run a little more is in the spring when it's chilly out and yet not chilly enough to keep the fan going on the stove.

EHB: Oh, I see. That's funny, because that's what Lois Skyberg had said, too, when I talked to her, she said that, you know, that the winter was nice and warm and the summer was nice and cool, but the spring and fall, yeah, the spring and fall were the least comfortable.

EHF: It's mostly because the fan on the furnaces don't run when it gets so warm. Of course, the colder it gets, the more the fan runs.

EHB: So have you always had a furnace installed in the basement?

EHF: Just that, it's the same one. We've had quite a few hot water heaters, though. (Laughter.) Oh, we changed the sink and everything. We had a one unit and that we took out. Somebody and I, we wanted it. So that was built in to fit the cupboards, or the cupboards to fit the. . . Oh, we've rearranged. We used to have the stove in the south window, but I didn't like the wind blowing in there when I was cooking. It would make the flames kind, you know, just. . .

EHB: Now do you have window wells around?

EHF: Just after they raised the streets. You see when we built this we had a real nice flat lawn all the way around. Of course then they put in this new pavement out here and they raised the. . . Well the pavement was so much lower than the side streets, so it cuts down, well, then that made the sidewalk and everything higher, so we had to fill in. Then we had to put window wells on the north and on the bedroom on the east. Course I never did like that, but then I had no choice, but. . .

EHB: Did that cut down your light very much?

EHF: I don't think so, no. Right now the snow's cut it down. Well, when we moved in here, it was a gravel road, gravel street, and the farmers always came to town on Saturday night. It was Saturday night, town. And the dust was just horrendous. Well then they wanted to make this farm to market highway and they wanted to pave it. Of course some didn't want it paved



'cause they had to pay for it, 'cause, but we did. We thought it was much healthier not to have that gravel dust coming at you. And so, you know, we paid for the pavement, and then we had to pay, at that time they'd oil the street. One on each side would cost us 10 cents a foot. And if we wanted it wider then we had to pay 10 cents for the next oil through there. Well of course we all paid the money for the oil because we didn't like the dust there either. Then they decided that we should have it oiled to the north. And of course we went along on that, even though we had to pay for it. Of course we had a garden and a farm north of us.

EHB: Oh, right on the other side of the street here?

EHF: Yes. And I think the only house was on that other corner. Then there is a large house next to that. In fact, there wasn't a house on that corner. They built that after we came in here too. And of course all of Canton's built north of us since we came in. (Laughter.)

EHB: Yeah, you're pretty close to the south side of town down here.

EHF: Used to be on the edge and now we're in the middle, practically. Well, with all the pavement and everything it got much better to live. I'm sure we could do it again if we have to. Of course now they've been putting oil on it so that we don't have much curb anymore. We used to have a deep curb out there.

EHB: They have to repave, I suppose, every couple years.

EHF: Well, one of these days, one of these days all the water from the street's going to come down. And of course more houses up there, more running water. But it's pretty good out here. Can't complain yet. When the water comes in the house then I'll start complaining. (Laughter.)

EHB: Well you want to hear a story? When I talked to Lois Skyberg she said that there was one, they have window wells all around the exterior of the basement, and there was one time that it had rained really heavily and she had forgotten to latch the window, so the window well filled up with water and it came rushing into the house. She was not happy. She said she made sure that she locked, latched all the windows from then on.

EHF: Do they have the larger windows, or?

EHB: They have, yeah, they have windows that are about the same size as yours, I think.

EHF: I used to say that what difference does it make whether you had tall windows or not, because everybody pulled their shade halfway down anyway. So we, at that time, we had as much window showing as other people.

EHB: Well it's nice, I think, because you get a view of the sky, instead of a view of everybody else's house.

EHF: And everybody could look down on us if they want to.

EHB: Yeah, but I'm sure nobody does.

EHF: Actually, the house across the street, their house sits on an angle, and their kitchen and everything is towards the back, so their bedrooms are this way. The other house north of me, they practically live in their kitchen, and that's to the north. Our other neighbor over there, his kitchen is this way, but he has the hallway, basementway. And the only one really that can really see over it, and I can, you know, neighbors that can see what we do over here, is Kermit and Glenda to the south. And that's, I mean nobody'd ever know whether I was here or not. They tell me that when I come down here and turn the lights on, you can't see them from, but I know if you come from the west you can see. And I said, well, I said they can always come to the door and knock if they want to see me. I know they can see when I turn my bedroom windows, the lights on and things, but. . . And then they'll say, 'We never see you, Esther, outside.' I said, well, do you expect me to sit outside just so people can see me? Of course I used to work outside a lot, flowers and things. Those days are no more!

EHB: You probably could have put a garden on top of your roof. Did you ever think of that?

EHF: I don't think it would hold it.

EHB: Yeah? Do you know what they used to, as a roof?

EHF: It's floorboards.

EHB: So it was planned as if you were going to build the top on top.

EHF: To build on, yeah.

EHB: They didn't reinforce it or anything, though, once it. . .

EHF: Oh, we have 8" beams through two places here. That's a beam.

EHB: Is it steel, or wood?

EHF: It's steel. And that's the beam block, see. And of course then we have, it's, we built a closet on the outside of it. And we have another beam through there.

EHB: But these weren't here when the basement was first built, or was it?

EHF: Oh, yes. We, that was put in before the roof was put on. And of course at that time you had to take what you could get. Those beams are plenty wide for a house, but it doesn't make any difference, it'd be down here anyway, so. I suppose if we'd known that my husband wasn't going to keep working in Canton that we would never have built it. We would have just gone to Sioux Falls. But you know we don't know what lies ahead in years. And of course when I think of moving into an apartment, which sometimes I think it's kind of hard to live alone in a, I think, no, I've got my washing machine and everything, and it wouldn't be home in an apartment. I'd have to get rid of all my knickknacks and, I call it junk, but. . . Of course my granddaughter wants that.

EHB: Oh, the china? That's a beautiful cabinet. I don't blame her.

EHF: That belonged to Abe Lincoln's campaign manager.

EHB: Oh, really? How did you get ahold of it?

EHF: Well, I had, we had some very good neighbors kitty-corner across the street. There were just the two of them. She had a niece in Omaha, which she seldom saw, and at one time they didn't see eye to eye. Well he had been, her husband had been to a sale, and he got it for practically nothing. Hauled it home on top of the car with the glass up in the air. Well they had it down in their basement for years and it was falling apart. She, and of course we, we took, we'd take her to the hospital every day to see her husband when he was up there and she counted on us for many things. And she was a very, very dear friend and neighbor. Couldn't have been a more loyal friend. She told us, she had, they had it down in the basement. She had that little house. And she said, "Esther," she said, "I want you to have that china cabinet." I says, "No, no, no, no." I says, "You give it to your niece." "No," she says, "you tell Tom to come and get it." And I says to Tom, "There's no way you're gonna go and get that. She has a niece." Well, she had brothers, but she was one of these much, much, much younger, and of course they were dying, you know. So, oh I think two, three years went by. One day she said, "You tell Tom to get over here and get that now. Otherwise," she says, "I'm going to haul it to the dump." I said, "No." I said, "You have a niece." "I don't care, I want you to



have it." So my husband went and got it and he put, he took it all apart, put new shelves in it, refinished it, glued it back together, and broke the one piece the last minute. When he took it in, he's going to tighten it just a little, you know. And of course I'm proud of it because I got it from her. On the back of it it told who it belonged to years back and everything. The sad part of it was, her husband was, well he could have had many degrees if he had written his thesis or whatever, but he didn't. He taught Greek, and math, and he'd been principal, and so he was one that thought he could type it up better. So what I have is his typewritten. And I don't know where that is either, but I have it. But I think it's very pretty. I really, I guess the niece would have enjoyed it anyway, but she'd had to have it all fixed up, and again it does cost money to redo them, there's no way out of it when they're falling apart. And my husband used to make lots of things, and some of the things I have in my house he made. My grandson, for our forty-fifth anniversary, decided to make those candle sconces. They're made out of black walnut. And he polished, and polished, and polished on them, they were so smooth he couldn't get the finish to, or the stain, to go into them. So he had to scratch 'em up a little bit.

EHB: Those are really nicely done.

EHF: I hope he'll like 'em back some day, I have, when I die, when I receive. . . Made it for our forty-fifth anniversary, he was still in school at the time. We worked long and hard on our sidewalks, I mean on our lawn. When the city put the pavement in, we let them dump all the dirt that they had scraped from the edges, you know, not thinking at the time what do you get from dirt like that. The boys enjoyed it, though, they used to play their little cars all over that dirt pile. But that was not good dirt for a lawn. Finally we told them we were going to spread it out on our yard because we were tired of seeing it there, and they didn't come and get it. So we spread it out, but it was not good dirt.

EHB: Did you have to remove it then to plant grass?

EHF: No, no, we just built it up as the years went by. And we put the trees in. We put apple trees in which, one of them didn't make it at all, I don't know what was wrong with it, it was a dwarf. And the other one was the five in one kind. And of course when storms came it soon broke out one kind and another kind and so all we had left was harvest apples. Which you have to use on time or they're no good at all, they get mushy. Well now it looks awful, but it does protect my grass a little bit. (Laughter.) Doesn't' look that bad in the summertime. But it'll have to come out one of these days, too.

EHB: Do you remember what other kinds of, you know what other buildings were being built when you built here?



EHF: No, I really don't. . . I don't know. We had a grocery store. And the grocery store was moved up to where A and , I mean A & R moved into, used to be Puckett. Puckett was a clothing store and the other half of it was grocery. And then they built where the A&R is now, which is a better location, of course. And we had a theater, an oil station on that corner, I think there's a bank and an oil station now. Of course we had that, Skybergs at that time was the old, the little old church or something, that that was their. . . I think they moved, too. We were at the, oh, we had a hardware store and a, I don't think there was much new building, course we had all the stores we needed. Of course then later the, well I think the post off-, I mean they did build the post office later. There was an oil station where Garden of Eat'n is now.

EHB: Right, but that was originally a church.

EHF: Years back it used to be a church. I think that's kind of a holy building, though.

EHB: My grandma loves there. She loves to go there to eat. Every time we visit, "You want to go to the Garden of Eat'n?"

EHF: They have good food there, cause it's healthy food. And of course the bank kitty-corner across the post office, that was a house.

EHB: Oh, it was? I didn't know that. There's a big nice green house next to that, too, isn't there? I think, I had never noticed it in town before, before when I was driving down the street, and it looks like it can't be very much older than this one, maybe four or five years.

EHF: Well the house to the east, that was built later. And that apartment house around the corner, that was built quite a bit later. In fact, they weren't building apartment houses at that time. I believe that the one out there by the academy, I think that was the first apartment houses. Then I think these, it was Souvenir's, then I think that came, and the Elm. After that they started to come in more and more. They were mostly for low income.

EHB: Well Canton must have been a fairly prosperous town, then, before. . .

EHF: It was all farmers. Mostly farmers. And of course oil stations and car dealerships, of course the theater brought kids in on Saturday night. And Noid's, they were in their old spot.

EHB: That was the drugstore, right?

EHF: A drugstore, and then they had a, what would they call it, you'd go in

there, and they had these old fashioned, of course everything was old fashioned, those round, those nice tables that people want for antiques now, you know, with the chairs with the rounded backs. And there you could go into an ice cream parlor. Polly Noid and Gus Noid were in the Noid's Drug at the time. And Polly Noid was very well-known, and this was when I was growing up, for being very nice to little kids. And she'd give them big ice cream cone, you know all you had was good ice cream in those days, and she'd treat them to ice cream cones. I suppose they made enough on drugs that. . . (laughter). But Gus Noid knew what he was doing. She worked down there, I think, all the time. And then eventually, I think Haisch bought it from Noids.

EHB: Is that where, is Noid's where Haisch's is now?

EHF: No, they were on the Main street, next to the, on the corner used to be a bank. There was a little building in between that, and then it was Noid's. They had a very nice place there. But then they bought that other area, eventually that went into a dress shop. I don't even know what's in here now. It's probably a, is it a doctor, an osteopath, a chiropractor?

EHB: Oh, boy, I don't know.

EHF: It's all changed.

EHB: Is that where, near where the paint shop was for a while, there's a paint and decorating shop? I might not be thinking of the right place. I really don't know Canton all that well.

EHF: This is north and south, Main Street, you know. And then east and west is Fifth, that's the main. Then the paint shop, that was on Fifth street.

EHB: I think I know where, I remember what you're talking about now. So there was a bank on the corner of Main, and then. . .

EHF: Used to be a bank on both sides. Of course now it's a Home Federal. For a while they made it into apartments. You know the old hotel right north of? Well that was Vickermans, and then Vickermans had a eating place going east and west, it was around the corner where the old bank. . . I don't remember what that name of that bank was, but. . . And then, of course, the street was the bank. Drugstore kitty-corner from that bank. Saturday nights all the men sat on the railing there, where they go down to the basement. You know everybody congregated in those days. People take their cars down and park and then walk down so they could sit and watch all the people go by.

EHB: Well I remember when I was a little girl my grandma used to take me shopping at a, I don't remember if it was dress shop or a children's shop.

EHF: K & K.

EHB: May have been. There were two kind of clothing stores in town that we used to shop at.

EHF: There's, well part of Noids after they enlarged, and then part of that went into, I think, Frisley's. Well there used to be a men's store there, but that was kind of the time before I could remember that. Mel Juhl and Sexe. . . Sexe, I think they had a men's' store down there.

EHB: I think I saw an ad for Sexe Clothing, or something, in the paper when I was looking through it the other day.

EHF: And then there was a children's store in there. That's probably the one you remember. That was there quite a while.

EHB: Well I remember getting some of my favorite clothes there.

EHF: They had beautiful clothes there. And when we went to a shower, we always bought the baby clothes there. Oh, it's changed, the town has. I think the hardware store on the corner, I think there was always one there, it use to be Tank's hardware store. And of course we don't have the stores, the dress stores and things like we used to.

EHF: Well, you know, what was his name, with the atom bomb, the. . . Kennedy, no. I think that, what in the world was his name. Lawrence? Lorensen?

EHB: I think I know who you're talking about, but he was from Canton, right?

EHF: They really had quite a few well-known people from Canton who moved away and, I mean, they're well-known. My dad had a blacksmith or repair shop down here, before I remember it, that's for sure. I ran across a, it was an advertisement of that, one day. Lot of things around here if I just go through 'em and find 'em. But you know really Canton, the number of people haven't grown that much.

EHB: No, I was looking at that when I. . . I think in, right after World War II, the population was about 2,500, and now it's 2,700.

EHF: And then it went up to 2,600, but it isn't, considering, it hasn't grown



that much. And of course we do have the Behr business out there and we have this one north of town here, and the Good Samaritan, and of course it was the city of Canton that got that Good Samaritan going. At that time it was to be run by people in Canton, and they named it the Canton Retirement Center or something like that. And the of course event, evidently it was the Good Samaritan all the time, but I don't think they realized it. So there, really we should have more people in Canton, considering. Many drive in, you know, and work in Canton, and many drive to Sioux Falls, to. My husband drove to Sioux Falls for years.

EHB: Did he? Now he was a welder, right? Is that right?

EHF: Welder and a heavy-duty mechanic. Welders don't get paid anything unless they're welding for the government. That's true. He thought he's getting big money when he got \$3.25 an hour. That wasn't very much money, really. (Laughter.) And of course we didn't need snowmobiles, and. . . We didn't, like I said, you couldn't raise three boys in a place like this, because they have too many toys and too much clothes, and too much everything.

EHB: Well did all three boys share a bedroom, then?

EHF: Yes. We had two double beds in there, and there was always two who slept together. That worked alright. I mean, we had more people than that in that bedroom throughout the years. But nowadays children don't like to be in the same room together. But I definitely think it's because too much clothes and too many toys. I know, I have twin grandchildren. And the mother will tell them, get in there and straighten up your room. Well I walk in there, and I think, how could anybody in their right mind straighten up this room? Toys all over, and. . . They played with their toys. They used to run a train right in the middle of the floor here. They'd put a box up and it'd go over and they'd haul things in it. They'd have good clean fun. Many children nowadays don't know what fun is.

EHB: Or they think they can find it in front of the TV or something.

EHF: Drinking pop and. . . Didn't have pop in my house, we had milk. Still have milk in my house, but I have some pop too, but I don't drink it. You have to get started drinking that to really drink it, to really enjoy it.

EHB: Well I'm trying to think if I have any other questions that I really need to ask you.

EHF: I wouldn't advise anybody to build a basement house.



EHB: You wouldn't? Why not?

EHF: No. Because you spend as much money in fixing it up and keeping it fixed up as you would a house. You know my son said, "I can't understand Daddy, never put the top on this." I said, "Well, sometimes he talked about it." He says, "It wouldn't have been hard to do Mom." Of course not, he'd have his son to help him now, but he didn't then. Then he worked in Sioux Falls long hours. He used to work down here until one o'clock in the morning. He did much work on this house. And then my son says they're going to bulldoze it! That's okay. I can see that.

EHB: The thing is, that I don't, I don't think it makes all that much sense to bulldoze it, because you already have the basement here. You know you could still build a very nice house on top of it, and make that. . .

EHF: Well, you see, his friend in Sioux Falls, they started in building. They used a wheelbarrow to put the driveways in, with the cement. And of course he has gone on until he's one of the richest men in Sioux Falls. And he was down here one day, he told my son that the land would be worth more than the house. And of course we do have quite a bit of land here. So maybe it's worth more, I mean, maybe it's easier to bulldoze and start over. Now they fill it up, you know, and put electric heat, underneath it. And of course that doesn't do anything for the people living in the house, because that electric heat's very expensive. But now days, you know, these apartments, many of them have electric heat instead of. . . And a friend of ours said they think we've got it made, but he said, in the summertime our cooling bills are very, very high and in the wintertime the heat bills are just about as much as you'd pay that much extra for another apartment. And I can see if they bulldozed this and then filled it up, they could put an apartment house here if the city would let 'em. Seems to me it'd be an ideal spot.

EHB: Yeah, but anything that they built here they would have to dig a basement anyway.

EHF: But they don't build much. I mean they fill it up and then lay this. . . We kind of watched that apartment house down the street, and they don't go that deep. Of course, when they bulldozed that house, they asked permission to bury all of the cement and things from the, and they let them do that. Well to build a basement then you'd have to remove all that. But, personally I think a basement is good space.

EHB: Especially, well, this is essentially a finished basement already.

EHF: Well, yeah, they could put, they could build on and they could put a

washer/dryer up and just. . . There's a drain right there in the middle of the floor, but it's capped and boxed and. . . See everything slopes towards that. You really can't tell it excepting when you put furniture in you have to, you know. . . over there doesn't bother a bit. Now the table, that you had to fix, and the refrigerator you have to give it a little more in the front.

EHB: Now have you always had carpeting and such down here?

EHF: No, we had Congoleum to begin with. And then we just, we had light, it was squares. And then we decided, no, we were going to put carpet, and then after we put all of this in, we decided we were going to put carpet in the bedrooms, too. It'd be easier, you know, if it was a hardwood floor, to run the dustmop over it. But it's sure much nicer to get out on the carpet, out of bed. My carpet's old. I told my son I'd have to replace it one of these days, and, I said but I don't know if I want to spend that much money at my age. It's been a very good carpet, it's really stood the test of time, considering you walk in from outside and. . .

EHB: Do you remember when you put the paneling up on this, what is that, the east wall?

EHF: I don't know, my son, my husband decided one day that we were going to enclose the stairway and put paneling up, and now my son would love to tear it down and put a white wall up there. It was not that dark when we put it in, it was lighter. And it darkens in age. My son doesn't like it. He'd like to have. . . I said, oh well, he can do that after I'm gone. And I don't know what we did with our light up there, something went kablooey with it. He said he'd like to rewire it and just have the, it was a two way, you know, he'd like to rewire and just have the switch down here, cause I have a remote up there that I turn the light on with. But you know when we built this, you had a toaster and you had an electric iron, and not much else. That's what people had in those days. And of course now everything under the sun's electric. And I just heard on the TV that those lights over there are very dangerous if you don't. . .

EHB: Oh really? Why is that?

EHF: Well, they, of course it can't do anything there, but they say that you shouldn't put them where you can accidentally tip them over, because they'll start fires. And they said don't put it where a curtain will blow on to it. My cleaning lady took a, I have a sheepswool, and she took like this up there and it was on and right away it scorched it.

EHB: Oh, really? Well those halogen bulbs get really, really hot.

EHF: Two hundred and some degrees. But the other bulbs, if you throw a dishtowel over it, that'll burn too. We'd learned that in California. Our wash, our machine and everything was out in the garage, and they had a stationary tub there to rinse in. Didn't have these fancy ones at that time. And you'd come in to the garage from the, when you walked in from the side and then you'd go up three steps into the kitchen. And my dishtowel was so wet, so I opened up the door and put it over the light. And when the kids went out evidently they'd turned the light on. Pretty soon we smelled smoke. It burned up the clothes that were in that stationary tub. Of course, they were dry, they were. . . But otherwise it didn't do much else. But it could've burned the whole house if I hadn't been there.

EHB: Would you mind if I moved one of these panels aside? Do they move? I want to take a peek at that beam. Is that OK?

EHF: Now maybe that one'll move, on the other side it won't. But over there by the, on the, over there, the other one, that'll move.

EHB: Oh, it will. Maybe I should look there.

EHF: Yeah, you can move it. That's where I hang my slacks and stuff to dry. The gas pipe's there through there.



Veenis Interview

January 9, 1997

Erin Hanafin Berg: So, you were saying in the entryway something about '55. Was that when the basement part was built, or when they built the top part?

Gerry Veenis: Yeah, '55 is the date on it.

EHB: That's actually kind of later than the time period which I'm. . .

GV: Well, I'd say it was the fall of '54, I think it was, when they built the basement then they lived in the basement 'til the following spring, and then finished the house.

EHB: OK. Well, I'm wondering if this is the house, then, that I'm supposed to be researching. When I, you know where the basement house on North Dakota is, where Esther Fee lives. When I had talked to her, she had said that there were, they had gotten the idea of building a basement house because there were two others in town. And one was the one that my grandma lives in, on North Kidder, and then she said there was another one, she thought over here. But her house was built in '48, and if this wasn't done until '55. . . then. . .

Vickie Veenis: North Kidder, that's right. . .

EHB: Yeah, that's right across from the swimming pool.

GV: Park, yeah swimming pool.

EHB: But she had said that she had thought it was Don and Dottie Anderson's house, or it was near there, and they're just your neighbors right over that way, right?

VV/GV: (murmur agreement)



EHB: So I don't know what she was thinking.

VV: I don't know what it'd be, either.

GV: Must mean next door, Rose's.

EHB: Well, yeah, that was the other thing. When I had spoken with, I had found Sonja Oakland down, and she was Sig Togle's daughter, and she said that the house next door. . .

GV: She used to live here. This is Togle's house.

VV: That house, the house right over here, was actually an apartment.

EHB: Oh, OK. The whole house, or just. . .

VV: Yeah, isn't that right?

GV: . . . kitchenettes downstairs there. . .

VV: That's where Rose. . . Yeah, Gary Schultz, the teacher, and his wife lived there. But, I'm not sure if it was actually considered a basement home, or if it was actually an apartment. We could call Iris and ask her.

EHB: It could have been both, that it maybe originally was a basement and then they used it later as an apartment or something like that.

GV: OK, I can't remember it being an apartment, though.

VV: Well I know Iris and Gary lived down there, because Iris has told me that a couple of times.

GV: It must have been a long, long time ago.

VV: It was when they first came to town, for their student teacher course. I could call her and ask her. Yeah, that house actually next door is more finished for living downstairs than this one is.

EHB: Have you guys made modifications here? Was it. . . Yeah? Was it finished as a downstairs before? No?

GV: No, like no sheetrock. . .

VV: Very barren. Cold and dark.

EHB: They didn't have a kitchen or anything down there?

VV: Well, I think they had like stove hookup and such, but there were no cabinets or, kitchen cabinets or anything, homemade shower, no light fixtures. There were light bulbs there, but no light fixtures.

EHB: So it was pretty primitive.

VV: Yes! Yes. Very dark, tiles on the floor.

EHB: And how long have you lived here then?

VV: Twelve or 13 years.

EHB: And did you buy it from Tokle?

VV: No, we bought it from, we're actually the third owners.

GV: Tilman Dickens.

VV: Tilman Dickens was the second buyer. And the house had sat empty for some time I think before we came along. . . and then we added the kitchen on. From where that door is over was. . .

GV: It was here already. We just remodeled the kitchen.

VV: But this part here where we're sitting on, somebody added on to. . .

GV: Sig did.

VV: Sig did?

GV: When they built the house, they didn't think it was built big enough, so they added this part on. There's no basement under it.

VV: So we knocked the wall out and finished the kitchen. This was the old dining room. And then when we first moved in, before we did the kitchen, we put the family room in the basement. Always something. And where we started now needs to be finished almost over again.

VV: But I would imagine it would have been very cold living down there.

EHB: Yeah, well, you know it's funny because I spoke with the woman who had built my grandmother's house, Lois Skyberg was her name, and she said

that it was actually, you know the fall and the spring weren't very comfortable because it was, you know, damp and icky, but she said summer was really nice and cool and during the winter, it was actually really toasty warm. And they, they had insulated the concrete blocks, like they had poured some granular insulation in all of the holes in the concrete, so it was warmer than. . .

VV: Plus, you don't have that heighth [sic] to catch the wind. But yeah, the floors down there are very cold, and its dark down there.

EHB: Now, do you have window wells around your house? It's kind of hard to see with the snow. . .

VV: (murmured no) I know, it looks like there's nobody home when you drive by the house, because the living area is either downstairs or on the south side.

EHB: Well that's unusual that there aren't window wells.

VV: Yeah, I don't know why. . .

EHB: If they were only planning on living here temporarily, then maybe. . .

VV: Yeah, I don't know if that was the original plan, or if that just happened to be the way it was. I don't know.

GV: I lied, it's '53.

EHB: Fifty-three, OK.

GV: See, they've got their name in this closet here. Yeah, the guys that plastered it.

EHB: Oh, I see.

VV: I thought that said '57.

GV: No, it's '53. Sig Tokle and whatever his name is, a guy called Eine, what the heck was his name, he's a Norwegian, Eine Ziegle, or something like that his name was. Eine Lager.

EHB: Eine Lager?

GV: Plastered 1953. Eine, no Lager, Lage Riley. He was a real good plasterer if



you could keep him sober, I've heard a lot of stories about. . .

EHB: Oh, yeah? I think there were a lot of guys in Canton that were like that.

GV: Yeah, he had this drinking problem, they said keep him sober, and he was a good plasterer.

VV: There's a nice border of plaster up in the living room, you can go look at it. Yeah, I think originally too, even outside, Sig did things the old way I think, like there was a screen porch off the side of the garage, whereas, versus the house. I thought it was unusual that the screen porch was off the garage.

GV: He made a little garage out there that Volkswagen I remember he used to drive around when I was a kid.

EHB: Now you guys don't have like a walkout entry or. . .

VV: Well, we have a back door right down here.

EHB: So it's somewhat lower. . .

VV: Yeah, we'll go down, I'll take you down there.

VV: There's basically just, one, there were just the four rooms down there, I think, excluding the bathroom. And I don't know how old their kids were at the time, but. . .

GV: Three, three kids.

EHB: Well when I, Sonja said that she wasn't born until '54, I don't think, so she was. . .

GV: She's my age.

EHB: OK. So they had like built the top by then.

GV: Yeah, they would have built by then, 'cause that was plastered in '53.

EHB: She said she had two brothers, and one of them knows a lot about the house, but isn't very anxious to tell me.

VV: Really?

EHB: Yeah, I guess that he, well, maybe that's not, I haven't spoken with him,



so, but she said that he tends to be pretty secretive and private, and he guards their family history more closely than she does. She said that he's looking for a new job, so it's hard to find him these days, but she would give a call, and maybe she could persuade him to talk to me.

VV: We sure could have had Sonja up here, she's always saying she wants to come to the house.

GV: She was here once. She was here before we remodeled.

VV: I know when we tore out the old kitchen cabinets, they were the old metal kind, you know, really old, up here we found old report cards of the kids. That was kind of interesting. I think I gave those to Sonja when we found them. And I think Gerry found a couple toys downstairs when he ripped out the old shower.

EHB: Now, have you guys made any changes on the exterior? It looks like the original siding is still on.

GV: Yep.

VV: We haven't, no.

EHB: And you still have the same old windows and everything.

VV: Yeah. I think we'd like to put a garage up out here, but. . . And some of the windows really could use updating. It gets expensive. It gets expensive. There's a lot of money involved in redoing a house. When I stop to think of what we spent on this house, with the purchasing and the updating and the remodeling, we probably could have built, you know, given the time frame.

GV: We paid \$28,000 for the house.

VV: Well, but versus when we got married.

GV: Now try to buy a. . .

VV: Well yeah, but. . .

EHB: But this way you have a house with a history. I mean, you probably make your own history in a house, too, but. . .

VV: It's exhausting buying a fixer-upper, though, it really is. Especially when it involves a kitchen. Never again. Next house I bring my luggage, and that's

it. And the lot lines we found too, shortly after we lived in, the lot lines weren't', how would you say, Gerry, correctly marked?

GV: Well, they might have been, but. . .

VV: Our driveway, or the driveway we use, actually isn't our property, it's next door's. And we didn't find that out until after we'd purchased it. And I think they found out that the whole block is, well, from this house on, on west, is off a few feet.

EHB: Hmm. I was actually down at the courthouse today, trying to look up deed transactions, and stuff like that, and I found, I think for this property it's like the complete part of one lot, and then there's like half of another lot, and a fraction of another lot.

GV: Four feet. It's a lot and a half and four feet. Funny thing about it, when Sig lived here, the man next door needed to build a garage over here, and Sig thought he owned the land, so he sold him the land, and he never owned it in the first place.

VV: Well, in those days, though too, when they built, I don't think they had surveyors come in, and. . .

GV: Well yeah, but they still got them rods in the ground, I don't understand how they got them. . . check for them. . .

EHB: Now this house to the east of you is fairly new, right?

VV: Yeah.

EHB: So was that was all, was that empty there before, or was there a house there?

VV: Yeah, it was all empty.

GV: There was a dirt pile there since I was a kid.

VV: That house is only about a year and a half old.

EHB: Oh, really, that recent, wow.

GV: Sonja has some pictures, I don't know if she ever did show you them?

EHB: I've only met with her briefly yesterday, and I found her at work, so I

haven't seen anything, but. . .

GV: She's got some pictures of the house here.

EHB: Oh, she does, OK. I'll have to get in touch with her again and see if she. .

GV: Pictures over here, there's nothing over here at all. Don's house over there wasn't there. There's kind of a, kind of a creek or something like that used to run over there.

VV: So you saw like the deed and such at the courthouse?

EHB: Well, actually I was in the process of looking up the deed when they closed the courthouse on me. They said they'd be closing at 11:30 and I said, "Oh, no," it was about 11:15. So I'll have to go back and check it out.

VV: I don't know if that'll help you or not.

EHB: Oh, I see, OK.

VV: The only other basement home I can think of would be Ramsey's and that's out in the country. They homesteaded a farm just west of McCord there, kind of out there with Jim Carpenter and such lives.

GV: The only basement house I can remember like this is that Mrs. . .

EHB: Mrs. Fee's.

GV: Yeah, that's been there for, ever since I been a little tot.

EHB: Now, this other one, though, is that a fairly old house, I mean like built around the same time as, it's much newer. . .

VV: No, no it's new. I mean, they built the basement when they got married, and they've been married only a couple, probably twenty, 18-20 years. That was when they built the basement. So, it's not a real old homestead.

EHB: There's actually another one out on 11, going north toward Sioux Falls, the Rikansrud farmstead. Their house was built as a basement in '52, and then they put the top on in '54, which I hadn't realized. But I went, we were out there visiting yesterday and went down in the basement, and their. . .

GV: Was that Cliff?



EHB: Cliff and Olive, yeah. Their kitchen is perfectly, I mean it's exactly like it was in 1952. They've got the old stove, she's got the old fridge, there's one of those roaster, boiler, whatever it is, broiler ovens, you know those real big tall narrow things, and a long countertop, and a big huge rec room with a shuffleboard. It was just crazy, I couldn't believe it.

VV: And they had kids then?

EHB: They had kids. . .

VV: When they lived in the basement?

EHB: Yeah, I think that they had two, and then a third was on the way when they put the top up.

GV: Kurt was in my class, too.

EHB: It seems like there's a lot of them around here in Canton. I don't know why that is yet, I haven't figured it out, but I hope I'll be. . .

VV: I don't think I could, I would choose to live like that. I guess once you're in them, you're in them and you don't really realize you're in a basement when you're in them.

EHB: Well, I think part of what it may have been was kind of that, you know, Depression-era thinking. You know, most of the people who were, this was immediately after World War II, and so they were all so conservative with their money and it was, you know, the idea wasn't that you loaned money from the bank and built a house, but rather that you paid for what you could and lived with that. Like Olive Rikansrud was saying that she had the choice between living in the old house, their old farmhouse, with a pump, that she hated, and a cookstove, and the whole thing, or living in a basement and having running water, and she took that. You know, but they couldn't afford to build the whole house and do the plumbing and everything else all at once, so she said OK, I'll take this first step, and that'll be far better than what we have.

VV: Yeah. And I suppose too, you know, if you just get started with the basement you have your furnace and your. . .

EHB: Well, and then you know like for the Skybergs, it was, they had their equity in it then, you know they invested in this land, they were able to pay off the basement before they started the top part and so then they were a better credit risk and everything else. So it kind of made sense back then.



VV: Pretty interesting. . . find out. Well, would you like to see it, or do you have other questions?

EHB: Yeah. Maybe there'll be something that pops up while we're walking around, but. . . I don't know if I, I might need a copy of this. Would that be OK if I could take this and bring it back to you?

VV: Sure.

EHB: That would be helpful to have the footprint.

VV: That's our dream garage. Look over here, we were talking about the plaster. Now this house, it appeared that they covered up the wood floor right away. And we had lived here a few years before we realized there was wood under here.

EHB: That's a beautiful wood floor.

VV: Yeah it is, it had the old gold, I don't know if you remember when you grew up but the old gold carpet and green drapes. But this is the molding. . .

EHB: Oh, the plaster you were talking about. Ooh, that's pretty.

VV: And we know its plaster because it's got a crack in it. I mean the crack is, it's continuous. I often wish it would be wood, just to pull up the floor.

EHB: But it is nice. Well you know, back in the '50s, I think wood floors, they were kind of code, I mean like that was the standard, so they didn't really even think of them as being decorative, or. . .

VV: I would go for wood everywhere, I just love wood floors, I do.

EHB: But its in great condition, too.

VV: The windows, oh, the vents. I don't know why they chose to put the vents up there, but they're there in every room. And I don't care for 'em. Kinda hard to hang a picture around. But the big windows don't have storms or anything in it, but. . .

EHB: Oh, I see, so there's a big picture window here on the east.

VV: Yeah, and it gets kind of cold, and a little wood's rotted, and. . . He must have done his own woodworking, because it's not done first class, it's kind of rough and not much. . . you can tell the doors were just kind of made out of

just a piece of wood is all. It's got three smaller bedrooms. This room when we moved in and up until about a year and a half ago had the old boxcar siding on it. That must have been the brother's room. It was very, very dark. This is just a bigger bedroom.

EHB: And were these windows here originally?

VV: Yeah. Again, I don't know why they went with those windows. I don't care for them, it's really hard to get curtains over them, because we like to have the windows open in the summertime. . . And when we moved in, too, every room had the recessed lighting, just a little twelve-inch square, very dark, and we took all those out. And this room, who knows what this room. . . Oh, it's not bad tonight. Usually you can't even see the carpet. And again the, you can tell he just kind of made his own doors out of a piece of wood and stuff, and the old slider, slider stuff. This must have been, we figure this was probably Sonja's room. It had the old blue shag carpet when we moved in.

GV: Built by, see all these. . .

EHB: Oh, wild. Wow.

VV: Look at the writing, it's very. . .

EHB: Oh, yeah, it's really ornate, fancy.

GV: Built by Sig Tokle, plastered by Lager Reime, 1953.

EHB: Oh, that's neat. I've never seen that before.

VV: And then this from here to here was the old kitchen, this. . . hallway. This was probably the only entryway to start with.

EHB: Right, right. This was what the Rikansrud's was like, too, it was just. . . And they all seem to enter from the back, which is really weird to me, that they all were off the street. The Skyberg's house was like that too.

VV: And I don't know what kind, this isn't wood, it's not plaster, I don't know what it is, but it's. . .

GV: It's Masonite.

VV: And nothing down here was carpeted. We put that wall up, that's just kind of a fake wall. It was just one big room. This is my junk room. And it was all mason, just these big old brick blocks all the way around, in every

room. And the ceilings are real low. You can tell it, some of the original painting is still here, heavy lead stuff. But this room is real handy to have. This was the bathroom. And the original shower that was in here was just a piece of board that was just put up, that was all it was, my husband, well he put this up. And of course it was all the original brick and stuff. So everything was just very minimum, very minimal living, and you could kind of tell that. And then, of course this wall wasn't here either. And this wasn't. . .

EHB: Oh, this is the original floor here?

VV: Yeah. You know, it's very dark, just very minimum. And we just took out the original furnace just a few months ago. Yeah, it almost took up the whole room. It was enormous. But you can tell the windows are kinda, the house is getting old, and you know. . .

EHB: These windows seem much smaller than the ones in the other houses I've seen, like Esther Fee's windows are almost twice that size, I mean they're just really. . . So it kinda makes me think they that weren't wanting wanting to live in a basement very long, as opposed to everybody else. . .

VV: Yeah. And back there in that corner is where the stove hookup was, so this must have been where they ate. And you can tell that was, there's still original painting, and the floor and stuff.

EHB: But now, you said that, they didn't, like they hadn't divided it into rooms, really, or had they?

VV: No, well this wall was, this division was here. But that must have been the living room, the living area, this must have been the kitchen, and this is, everybody must have slept in this room, parents and kids and everything, because that's basically what we have for rooms. And this was here, this must have been the main closet. Yeah, that's what the cabinets were upstairs. And the older couple that bought it from Sig must have left it, just done like this stuff, made this into a shop, 'cause this is what it was. But it just must have been the three rooms, with the exception of the one room. I can't imagine, you know, three kids and the parents sleeping in the same room. In those days it was just do what you could to survive, I guess. And just feel how cold it is down here. I just can't imagine living down here. 'Course, then maybe the ventings were just based for down here, you know now its. . . Someday I'll wonder what its like to have a real laundry room. I keep telling my husband, instead of just a corner with. . .

EHB: Well I think most old houses are kind of like that, though.



VV: I hate that room. You can't even see back there, really, it's so snowed up out there. Not much to it, really.

EHB: No but I mean I can, I can see. . . There's not as many things that distinguish the basement here as being a basement house as there were in other. . .

VV: No. And I don't know if that's just the way that family chose to live, or if it was indeed temporary. I don't think it was a real, I don't know what the family was like for them, you know if they were a real close-knit family or just if the parents did their thing and the kids did their thing, I don't know. He seems to remember playing here as a kid, though, don't you? You don't?

GV: But I can remember being here, we used to play next door, lot here. . . old dirt pile. . .

VV: Its a very small lot.

EHB: Now does it stretch, is there like an alleyway back there? Yeah?

VV: The motel's just right out there.

EHB: Well would you mind if I went around and took a couple pictures?

VV: No, not at all.

EHB: I've especially got to take a picture of the inside of that closet.



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