

While looking at old pictures in a book about the settlement of the prairies, and seeing the photos of the sod houses many homesteaders built, it occurred to me that in our area, where Nature, if left alone, would soon turn open fields and meadows once again into forests, we are very dependent on wood. That led me to look around the cabin to see just how many kinds of trees have provided us material for our daily lives.

On the outside, our cabin is board and batten white pine. Inside, the walls are made of planed white cedar, and the ceilings are either cedar or white pine. Our kitchen cupboards are white cedar, too, with counter tops of black cherry.

The large double-sided bookcase, eight feet long with three shelves on each side, is cherry, as well. Cherry reappears in the loom, too, and in the loom bench. Our straight chairs are also cherry with maple included in parts of some of them.

The filing cabinet is oak. The desk is white ash and sugar maple. The cupboard by the south window is pine, as is the large chest under the west window. The old rocking chairs and Morris chair are some wood that we've never identified—not so much because it is unusual, but because the finish is old and we've not investigated it.

The book shelves by the south window are pine. The trim in the cookstove alcove is cherry. The round table where we eat our meals and drink our coffee is oak. The little sugar dish that holds cube sugar is made of birch bark.

My baking peel is maple, and the large wooden spatula I use to remove flat breads from the oven is pine. Runo made both of those. He also whittled out the wooden spoons I use. They are maple. The big ladle that hangs on the wall between the baking peels is olive wood.

In a cupboard drawer is the rolling pin. That is maple, too. It was my mother's, a wedding present from her younger brother.

As we walk back and forth in the house, we trod on an oak floor in the main part of the cabin. The kitchen floor is pine.

All of these elements of our cabin and of the furnishings and utensils, would be of little use this time of year without that other wood—those chunks that have been split into lengths to fit the basement stove and those smaller pieces that are just right for the cookstove. Wood provides our only source of heat. This evening, with the temperature just at zero Fahrenheit, we are cozy and warm in the cabin.

Those sod houses on the prairie were, no doubt, easier to keep warm than a frame house. Dependent on either purchased coal—if it was available in the area—or buffalo and cow “chips,” the euphemism for dried manure, the homesteaders would have envied our good woodpile.

Outside the house, we appreciate the silver maples that shade us during the summer. The big tree, planted by my great-grandfather, is just south of the cabin, and two of its “daughters” guard the northeast and southeast corners of our fenced yard. Two more of the silver maples stand just north of the house. And in the spring, they also cooperate in the production of our backyard maple

syrup.

I guess it is part of the pleasure of a close relationship with our own surroundings that we “know” our trees. We never look at a tree and think just that word—“tree.” In our minds we see hard, soft, or silver maple; white, yellow, or gray birch; beech or blue beech; white, red, jack, or Scotch pine; white or black spruce; balsam fir; white cedar—and on and on. It doesn’t really matter, I suppose, that we think of them by name. But it does matter, I think, that we recognize what a large role these trees have in our daily lives. And, in these times, with much of our surroundings are composed of factory produced derivatives of petroleum, it is comforting to know that it is Nature that is sheltering us.