

Backgrounder

Doukhobor Dugout House

National Historic Site of Canada

On a scenic bend of the North Saskatchewan River, approximately 100 kilometres north of Saskatoon and 8 kilometres southeast of Blaine Lake, lie the remains of a rare residential structure built by Doukhobor settlers in 1899. It is the only known partially surviving example of a dugout shelter, a practical and temporary house constructed not only by Doukhobors, but by many settlers of various ethnic backgrounds upon their arrival on the Canadian prairies, and which played a crucial role in its settlement. These initial and expedient dwellings were replaced as quickly as possible by more permanent ones, as required under the conditions of homesteading under the *Dominion Lands Act*.

Approximately 7,500 Doukhobors settled on large blocks of land in central and eastern Saskatchewan in 1899. While most were temporarily housed in large log structures, some of the new colonists chose to build semi-subterranean shelters along the banks of the river before moving to flatter ground nearby. The excavated areas of these buildings were lined with walls of wood and clay and covered with sod laid over branches. These dugouts were modeled on houses known as *auli* or *zemlyanka* found in their homeland, the Kars region of the Caucasus.

The Doukhobor Dugout House located near Blaine Lake was one of several such dwellings gouged into the banks of a steep coulee close to the western shore of the North Saskatchewan River and used to shelter some 300 people until 1904, when they moved to permanent communal houses in the village of Oospenia, located less than a kilometre away. Nearby is the Oospenia Spring, a year-round source of drinking water that influenced the Doukhobors' choice of this location for their village site.

For five years, nine families occupied this structure, cooking and sleeping in an area of about 40 square metres (435 square feet). Unlike the other dugouts, which were stripped of useful materials or ploughed under, this example remained intact and was put to other uses, resulting in its survival as a unique vestige, closely and emotionally associated with the earliest history of the Doukhobors in Canada. It recalls the tremendous hardships faced by early settlers and the practical ways in which they met and overcame them.