

# San Jacinto River Authority Kids Page

## Could YOU survive life on the Texas Frontier?



During the early to mid-1800's, families from the East and Southeast United States left their homes to settle the Texas frontier. People moved west for a lot of reasons and they came from all walks of life. These brave people had one thing in common: they were committed to survive any and all hardships in order to provide a better life for their families. Even after reaching their destination, there was still hardship and danger.

The most important thing was to settle near a stream, a natural spring or a river. If they couldn't find land near water, they would have to dig a well. Without water, the family and their livestock could not survive.

After 1854, when the European windmill was adapted to pump water instead of grinding grain, families could drill even deeper wells and install a windmill to pump groundwater to the surface. These structures might be located near the home, or in the fields to provide water for livestock. The settlers also learned to capture rainwater in barrels for drinking and other household uses.

### **The work was hard and the days were long...**

Father and the boys immediately got to work constructing some type of simple shelter before clearing the land to build a larger, more permanent log cabin home. The women planted their precious supply of seeds to start a garden. They always planted corn because it required little work and could thrive without too much water. The girls had to weed and water the plants...and protect the seedlings from hungry animals. When they finished in the garden, Mother and the girls made, mended or washed clothes. They churned butter and made cheese, and they cooked the family's meals over an open fire. If there was any time left in the day, Mother would use her spinning wheel to spin wool or cotton into thread or yarn for weaving into cloth.



**A frontier family's sod house and new windmill.**

The boys worked in the fields, and fished or hunted for game to put food on the table. They also had to rake ashes from the fireplace and put them in the "hopper" for making lye soap. They chopped and brought in wood for the fireplace or wood stove. Both boys and girls helped make candles and soap, gather eggs, feed the chickens and other animals. If the family had a cow, milking chores always came first.

Until the family was able to secure a convenient source of water, children had the task of getting water from a river or stream and carrying it home for cooking, drinking, cleaning, bathing, and washing clothes. Some days, a youngster might make a dozen trips to get water with a bucket that weighed about 5 pounds empty!

Children were busy from sun up to sun down and they played a very important role in the frontier family. Everyone had their assigned chores, and parents relied on their children's help to complete the day's work. The youngsters didn't realize that their life was hard. It is likely that they behaved like children everywhere -- running off to play whenever they could!



In Frontier times, people usually didn't bathe every day. About once a week or so, the big oval tub would be brought inside and filled with water that had been heated on the stove or over a fire. The only soap available was homemade lye soap -- made from water, ashes and pig fat (lard) -- it smelled awful and was harsh on the skin.

It was common practice for the whole family to share the same bath water. The oldest man of the family would go first, then the next oldest, then the women and then finally the children had a turn. By the time the youngest member of the family had his or her chance to bathe, the water was so cloudy you couldn't see if anyone was still in it. This is the source of the old saying, "Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater!"