

## BUFFALO HIDE TIPI

Home on the plains for the American Indians who traded at Fort Union was the buffalo hide tipi. Second only to the eagle feather war bonnet, the tipi is what many think of when the subject turns to American Indians. Let's explore this buffalo hide tipi top to bottom, inside and out, for a deeper understanding and appreciation of this original American Indian home and the lifestyle of the people who created it.

First, set aside your own cultural conditioning and enter the Fort Union/Confluence region of the early 1800s. American Indians had no paved highways, no manmade bridges, no mail, UPS shipping, or rail service. All travel was by foot or on horseback; people carried baggage on their back, or by dog or horse. Since wheels were never used before white men brought them to the Plains, Indians used travois to transport household items they couldn't carry themselves.

## TRAVOIS

A travois consists of a hoop or platform of woven rawhide and sticks supported by two long, trailing poles. The forward ends are crossed or joined and bound together, resting on the shoulders of the dog or horse. Collar, breast strap and cinch bind it to the animal or it is tied to a riding saddle. The platform is positioned a short distance behind the tail and secured to the long poles which drag on the ground. When not in use, the travois is leaned against the tipi. Everything in and about the buffalo hide tipi must be "portable via travois." In the early dog days, the scale of everything was smaller. With the arrival of the horse, tipi covers and furnishings could be enlarged.

## TANNING PROCESS

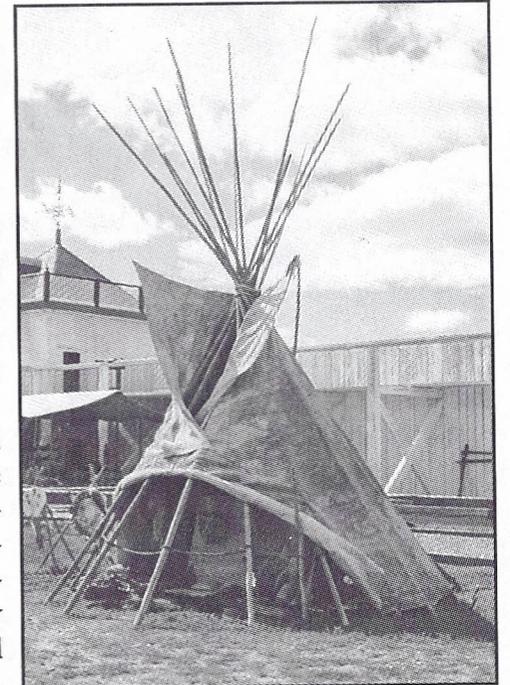
Women dressed or tanned the hides used to make the tipis. Using the brains, liver and fat of the buffalo as the softening



*Before and after the horse, dog travois hauled family goods.*

agents, they sewed them together with thread made from buffalo back muscle tendons called sinew. Once tanned and cut to pattern, these hides were sewn together and both sides of the hide were smoked, using a smudge fire built within a tightly closed cover. Smoking kept the hides soft and rain-resistant.

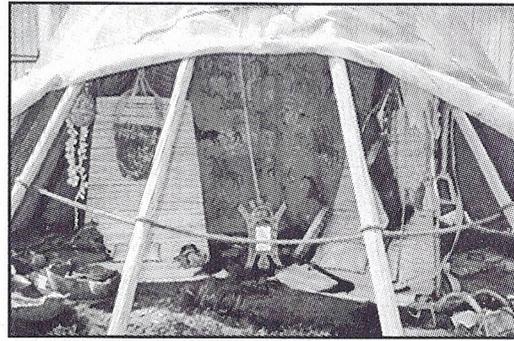
Women constructed and owned the tipis, which gave them control over all domestic duties within it. This buffalo hide tipi is of the horse-drawn size, approximately 14 feet in diameter and weighing about 100 pounds. Tipi covers were made from



*Indian women owned the family tipi.*

12 to 14 summer-killed cow buffalo skins with the wool removed. Once completed, the newly made tipi cover was stretched over 15 poles made from lodgepole pine. Two extra poles were fitted into pockets at the tips of the flaps which, when open, created a chimney-like draft which drew out the inside fire smoke. Buffalo "beards" adorned the tips of the smoke flap pockets. A piece of hair-on buffalo hide, a bear skin, or a trade blanket served as a door. A tipi this size could hold as many as twelve people.

In summer's heat, one side of the tipi cover could be rolled up to allow for more ventilation. Some tipis—usually those belong to special Indian societies—were decorated with painted figures and designs on the outside of the cover. Most tipis, however, were plain and only minimally decorated, like the one before you. The Indian woman who owned the tipi also cut, peeled, and smoothed the tipi poles. Because no pine forests grow near the Confluence region, tribes traded for lodge poles from neighboring tribes who lived nearer pine-forested mountains. Poles could also be cut from more crooked cottonwood saplings. Tent stakes were fashioned from decoratively peeled chokecherry wood.



*Tipis were both functional and artistic.*

## TIPI INTERIOR

Although women owned the tipi, tradition determined the hierarchy within the lodge. The men's side was on the right, and they entered that side. The women's side was on the left, and she entered that direction.

Kinship determined how relatives and in-laws spoke and were spoken to. This well-defined pattern helped to maintain order in a fairly small area where people went about their daily business.

Functional and artistic interior furnishings of this tipi represent the many Upper Missouri Indian tribes that traded at Fort Union. Softly tanned buffalo robes covered beds made of dried grasses. Hanging behind the bed is a painted battle exploit buffalo robe, depicting warrior deeds of daring and bravery in combat. Men painted battle exploit scenes, while women painted more abstract or geometric designs on their robes. The furniture piece the Plains Indians made was a unique backrest composed of thin willow branches laced together and hung on a tripod. Look for the buffalo-tail fly swishers.

## MEN'S SECTION OF THE TIPI

Feathered headdresses could often be tribally identified by their shape or the "lay" of the feathers. Small, white breathe feathers adorn the quill shaft of each plume; decorative horsehair dyed yellow falls gracefully from the feather tips. A strip of glass trade beads identifies the front of the skullcap; white ermine tails dangle from the temples.

Other warrior regalia included shields, bows and quivers of arrows, a scalp-adorned lance, and the human-head club and pointed stone war club. Constructed from thick, heat-shrunk buffalo rawhide, quite often a shield was cased with a buckskin cover. This cover might display painted figures of animals, birds and insects, or celestial objects such as stars, sun, moon, or the night sky. Other adornments included claws, feathers, horsetails, colored trade wool and brass hawk bells. The finished shield reflected the owner's interpretation of his "medicine," or personal power,

often resulting from a deeply spiritual vision or dream. Most shields were meant to be carried into battle and used for intimidation and personal defense; others were created for ceremonial use and dances.

The most common bows were made of wood such as ash and Osage orange, a hard wood known as bois d'arc by the French trappers. Trading posts stocked bow blanks of straight-grained hickory among their weapons-related inventory. Animal sinew was sometimes used to back the bow, which increased its resistance to breakage. Strings were usually made of spliced, twisted sinew.

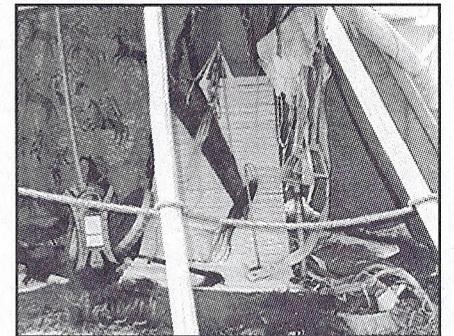
Most warriors made their own arrows using straight shafts of ash, wild cherry and sarvisberry [serviceberry], among others. Iron arrowheads from traders were common, along with points of bone and knapped stone. Fletching was cut from hawk, owl, or turkey feathers.

A bow case and quiver were needed to store and carry the bow and between 10 and 20 arrows. The workaday outfit was plain, unadorned buckskin with perhaps a few fringes. Fancier cases and quivers were often highly ornamented with glass beads, colored trade cloth, animal fur, porcupine quills and heavy fringe.

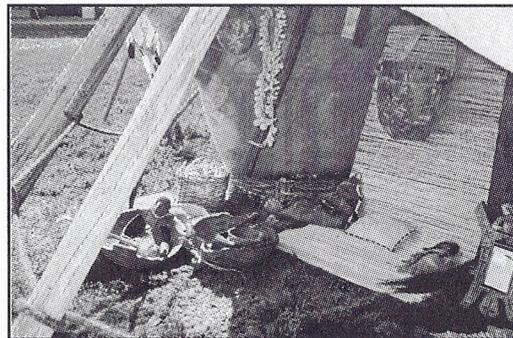
War clubs were designed to be intimidating as well as deadly, sometimes displaying a chilling iron spike or sharpened stone head and human scalp hair. The war lance displays a human hair scalp as a war trophy. The forged iron blade is the shape and design once stocked in the Trade Room at Fort Union.

A horse-head dance stick was carried by a warrior who wished to honor the spirit, courage and cooperation of his war horse when dancing or ceremonially reciting his exploits in battle. Mane and tail hair, along with a bridle and a trade wool saddle, decorate the carved wooden figurine.

Personal adornment for the man often included an ornament that attached to his hair. It was made from red, yellow, and blue-dyed porcupine quills with a brass hawk bell, tin tinkler cones, and horse tail hair. These might be worn to emphasize his scalp lock or to contrast with his darker natural hair.



*Men entered the right side of the tipi.*



*The left side was the domestic side.*

## WOMEN'S SECTION OF THE TIPI

Mirrors—often mounted on wood—were eagerly sought by women and men alike. As with so many other mundane or functional items in the tipi, the elaborately carved turtle effigy mirror

transcended its purpose and became a decorative artwork with a spirit all its own. The porcupine-tail hairbrush was another example of this concept.

Spread about upon the floor of the tipi are foods such as sundried corn, squash rings, and dried chokecherry cakes. Wound about a woman's digging stick are long strings of prairie turnips, called *teep se nah*, in the Sioux language. The gardening hoe blade is made from a buffalo scapula. Note, too, the buffalo rawhide, willow-framed burden basket. These were used mostly by older women and weren't quite as showy as the woven bark baskets. The carrying strap was slung across the chest.

Notice the beautifully carved bird and beaver effigy feast bowls, buffalo horn spoons and cups. Utensils for food preparation include the rawhide cherry-mashing bowl containing a mortar stone and hammer and the scapula cutting board with shoulder-blade squash knife. Hide-dressing tools include the notched elk leg-bone flesher and elk antler-handled, iron-bladed hide scraper.

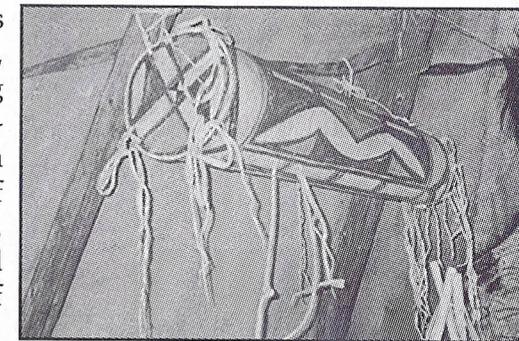
The odd, parchment-looking sacks tied to sticks are dried buffalo heart sacks and bladders that soften and expand when filled with water. To take a drink, you simply set your mouth on the edge of the sack and squeeze the bottom.

Horse gear includes a man's pad saddle and a wood and antler-framed "prairie chicken snare" saddle, both with quirts attached. Rawhide forefoot hobbles and a braided, buffalo-wool catch rope are also visible.

## OTHER ACCOUTREMENTS

Additional products of women's artistry include the beaded pillows on the back rests and the beaded storage bags of buckskin hanging from the tipi poles. Interesting use was made of the skinned lower legs of elk and deer, leaving the dew claw toes

attached. Several legs skins were sewn together, forming a unique-looking pouch or sack. The example here contains a women's sewing kit of bone and iron trade awls, trade needles, sinew and linen thread, and lacing of rawhide and buckskin.



*This parfleche stored a warrior's headdress.*

Rawhide parfleche envelopes are leaning against the inside cover. Geometric designs, created by women, usually reflect a tribal affiliation and are painted with native earth pigments, or those obtained from trading posts like Fort Union. Parfleches were used to store food, clothing, and household tools. The cylinder-shaped parfleches encase the feathered headdress bonnets worn by distinguished men to display their war-honor and horse-stealing "coup" feathers. Cylinder cases were also used to protect sacred medicine bundle objects.

Musical instruments were an integral part of ceremonies, prayers, and dances. The rattle is made of deer toes strung on a willow stick handle, decorated with tin cones and horse hair. The cottonwood drum hoop is covered with a rawhide head painted with a buffalo effigy. The beater uses buffalo wool stuffed inside a buckskin sheath.

The buffalo, or bison, was central to the Plains Indians' spiritual beliefs, as well as their economy and survival. The giant buffalo bull skull serves as a fitting altar for the medicine pipe. The red Catlinite stone bowl represents the flesh and blood of the Buffalo People and all other peoples. The wooden stem symbolizes all trees and plants, and all things green and growing on the earth.

The buffalo hide tipi perfectly illustrates how trade goods acquired from posts such as Fort Union were integrated into the material culture of the Plains Indians. It also completes the circle of buffalo hide production: who produced the hides and what was done with the trade goods received in exchange.

## GAMES AND TOYS

Toys and games were popular with all Indians, and had a place in every family tipi. Look for the buckskin doll stuffed with buffalo wool, decorated with glass trade beads, and dressed in trade cloth. A favorite game of men was to try to score a bulls-eye by

throwing a wooden spear through a moving, rawhide-strung hoop. Shiny Ball, a women's land hockey game, was played with curved cottonwood sticks and a beaded buckskin shiny ball stuffed with buffalo wool. Double Ball, another women's game, used two hair-stuffed orbs joined together that were tossed among team players using short batons.

Women's gambling often centered on a dice-in-a-basket game. Dice were carved from animal bone, plum pits or wood, and incised with dots and lines, painted symbols or animal effigies. Scoring sticks kept track of wins and losses. The Ring and Pin game uses deer toe bones as the rings and a long, sharpened deer leg bone for the pin.

### **BULLBOATS**

Bullboats ferried people, dogs, baggage, and firewood across the river. To make the boat, Indian craftsmen stretched a fresh buffalo hide over the willow framework, and laced it around the top edge. The hour-glass shaped hole in the center of the paddle helped keep the bullboat from wobbling during each stroke in the water.

### **CONCLUSION**

The buffalo hide tipi was the perfect home for a nomadic people. Even after the introduction of canvas, Plains tribes continued to produce the hide tipi. By the late 1870s, however, buffalo hunters with their long-range rifles threatened to exterminate the bison. As buffalo became scarce, most tipi makers turned to canvas for the main tipi covering.

Seeing a furnished buffalo hide tipi in the twenty-first century is a rare opportunity. Take your time and get a good look at this exhibit; there are few like it in the world.

## *Buffalo Hide Tipi*



Assinboin Camp  
Karl Bodmer