

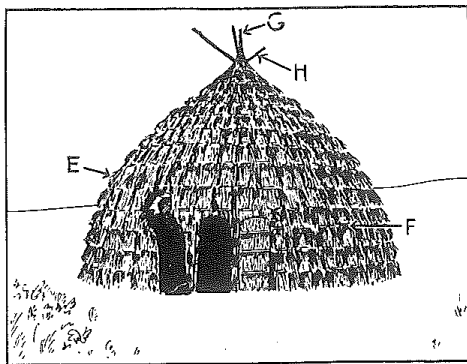
# DENVER ART MUSEUM

DENVER, COLORADO

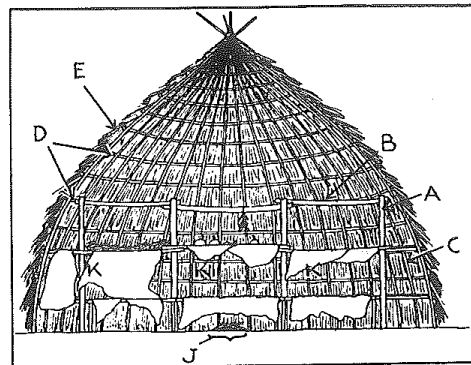
## *Department of Indian Art*

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EXTERIOR



INTERIOR

(Cleveland Museum of Natural History)

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## THE GRASS HOUSE OF THE WICHITA AND CADDO

**GRASS HOUSES** were used by the southern branches of the Caddoan linguistic stock, that is, the Wichita and Caddo groups, and a long list of now vanished tribes once living in Arkansas, western Louisiana and eastern Texas. About 1,350 Indians, the remnants of many of these tribes, are now living in western Oklahoma. They were still using the grass house 25 years ago, but information is lacking as to whether any are now used.

The exact extent of the grass house in very early times cannot definitely be stated. In the north of the area it was certainly in use in 1541, when Coronado reached the Wichita on his search for gold. Descriptions of the houses found in the expedition's records might well have been applied to those of the 19th century. For the south there is the description of Joutel, one of La Salle's men, who reached the Caddo country after the murder of his master in 1687. His narrative gives a very full and clear account of the grass houses, their construction and contents.

For further information about the Wichita group see leaflet 40. For a list of all the Caddoan tribes see page 183, volume 1, of the Handbook of American Indians, Bulletin 30 of the Bureau of Ethnology.

### FRAMEWORK

**HEAVY BEAMS.** A circle from 15 to 40 feet in diameter was drawn on the ground. Around its circumference were set up from 8 to 16 forked top logs 12 to 15 feet high (A). These logs were usually cedar. Other logs (B) were laid across the tops of these uprights and were firmly tied in place with slippery elm bark ropes.

**WALL RIBS.** Another circle was drawn on the ground outside of the main beams, about 4 feet from their bases. On this outer circle were set from 50 to 75 long, slender cedar poles (C), which leaned inwards and rested on the transverse beams of the main framework, to which they were tied. The tops of these poles were tightly fastened together.

Rows of slim peeled willow rods (D) were next tied to these ribs at right angles to them. These horizontal ribs were about 2 feet apart. They were fastened in place with elm bark cord.

**THATCHING.** Bunches of long, coarse grass (E) were tied to the horizontal ribs in a series of overlapping layers, the work beginning at the bottom of the structure.

When this thatch was in place a second series of horizontal ribs (F) was put in place on top of the thatch, to keep it firmly in place. At each crossing of the horizontal and vertical ribs an ornamental tuft of grass was tied, the line of tufts following the invisible upright ribs.

**PEAK.** At the top of this cone-shaped structure a sharp peak (G) of tightly bound grass bundles was set up. It was about 3 feet high. At the base of this peak short poles (H) projected to the four points of the compass. The peak was 15 to 25 feet above ground.

**ENTRANCES** were formerly four in number, facing the compass points. They were about 2 feet wide and 3½ to 5 feet high. Two of them, those to the north and south, were only used during certain ceremonies. But in more recent years only the eastern and western ones have been made. The south entrance seems to have lasted longer than the north. The east entry is used in the morning and the west in the afternoon. These openings were closed with panels made by tying bunches of grass to willow

frames. They were not hinged, but were set to one side either within or outside the building.

**SMOKEHOLE.** The smoke from the central fireplace escaped through a small hole in the roof a little to the east of the peak.

**SYMBOLISM.** The four projecting beams at the peak were symbolic of the compass points, where were the paths down which the gods came to help man. The peak typified the heavenly home of the mysterious force which filled all nature.

## INTERIOR ARRANGEMENTS

**FIREPLACE.** In the middle of the floor a shallow excavation was made for the fire (J). A 17th century account says that the fire was not allowed to go out, being made of large trees which were constantly pushed into the firepit as they burned away. Anyone who came in the building took care of it. The fireplace was considered to be extremely sacred, and was treated with great reverence by all.

**BEDS.** Around the walls and between the large upright posts were a series of beds (K). These were platforms, 3 or 4 feet wide, and 2 to 3 feet from the ground, made of cane in the southern parts of the area and of willow rods in the north. On them were placed rush mats, dressed skins and buffalo robes. Upper berths were often constructed for sleeping places or for storage. The spaces between the lower berths were also used for storage. There were six beds in most houses, but twelve or more might be found.

Each berth, or pair of berths, was provided with skin curtains which could cut it off from the rest of the room. These curtains were often painted with war scenes.

**CORN MORTAR.** Halfway between the fireplace and the western door stood the family corn mill. This was a section of log, a foot and a half in diameter and four feet long, firmly implanted in the ground. In the upper end a deep hollow was dug out. In this hollow the corn was reduced to meal by pounding it with long, heavy wooden pestles. Usually several women pounded together.

**NUMBER OF OCCUPANTS.** Though small houses of this type were made for single families, most of them were occupied by several groups, as many as a dozen being mentioned for the large houses found by the French. The fire was common to all, but each family was assigned to several of the berths, mat partitions being hung between the several sections. On and under the berths and on the beams above were stored the mats, clothing, tools, weapons and the pottery, basketry and wooden utensils of the family.

**VILLAGES.** As these tribes were agriculturalists they located their villages on sites near land suitable for farming. As many as 70 or 80 houses were grouped fairly close together in favorable localities, such as the lower slopes of well-watered valleys. All around were the fields. These villages were permanent. If for any reason it became necessary to abandon them they were burned. The presence in the tribe of an official appointed to pick new sites indicates that such removals did come about. When the tribes went on buffalo hunts they lived in skin tipis like those used by the Plains tribes. See leaflet 19.

**FORTIFICATIONS.** In reference 4 there is an account of the method of fortifying the houses. In localities where attacks from hostile tribes were to be feared the floors were excavated to a depth of 2 feet and 3-foot earthworks were thrown up around the outside of the house, thus making a 5-foot embankment behind which the villagers could fight. The thick grass walls were impenetrable by arrows. As a precaution against fire-arrows the grass thatch was well dampened. As these villages had no place in which to gather horses in the event of an attack this process of fortifying the houses died out when horses and firearms became widespread.

### OTHER STRUCTURES

**WORK ARBOR.** Near each house, unless the owners were very poor, was built an arbor in general construction much like the house, but of different shape. These arbors were rectangular and but 8 or 10 feet high. The thatch covered the roof, but failed by 4 feet of reaching the ground. Inside was a low platform on which the Indians worked and rested during the heat of the summer.

A smaller arbor was long ago used as a sleeping place for the young girls of the tribe.

**DRYING FRAME.** A platform of poles was made, perhaps 10 by 20 feet, and far enough above the ground to necessitate the use of a ladder made of a single notched log. Corn, meat and skins were laid on this platform to dry and from it were hung drying pumpkin strips.

**SWEAT HOUSE.** This low domed hut of logs and earth or mats was used for the sweat bath so common among the Plains and many other tribes.

Compiled from the following sources by F. H. Douglas:

BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY.

1. Article on the Grass House—Fletcher. Page 505, Vol. 1, of the Handbook of American Indians, Bulletin 30.
2. Article on the Caddoan Stock—Fletcher. Page 182, Vol. 1, of the Handbook of American Indians, Bulletin.
3. Villages of the Caddoan Tribes West of the Mississippi—Bushnell. Bulletin 77, pages 179-183.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.

4. Indian Forts and Dwellings—Doyle. Annual Report 1876, page 460.

CARNEGIE INSTITUTION OF WASHINGTON.

5. The Mythology of the Wichita—Dorsey. Publication 21, pages 4-7.

CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

6. Indian Homes—Madison. Pages 20-21.

Pictures 1, 3, 6; accounts of early explorers, 3; general description of the Wichita, 5; descriptions of grass houses, 1, 5, 6.