

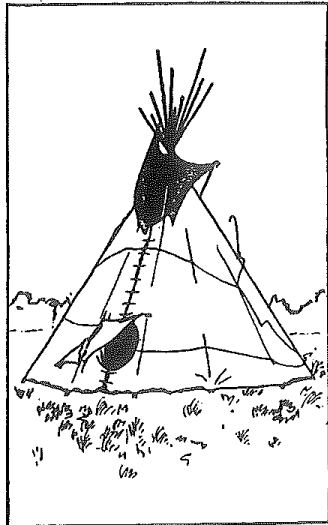
DENVER ART MUSEUM

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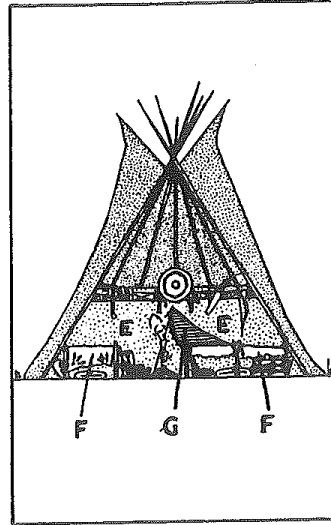
DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

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EXTERIOR FIG. 1



INTERIOR FIG. 2

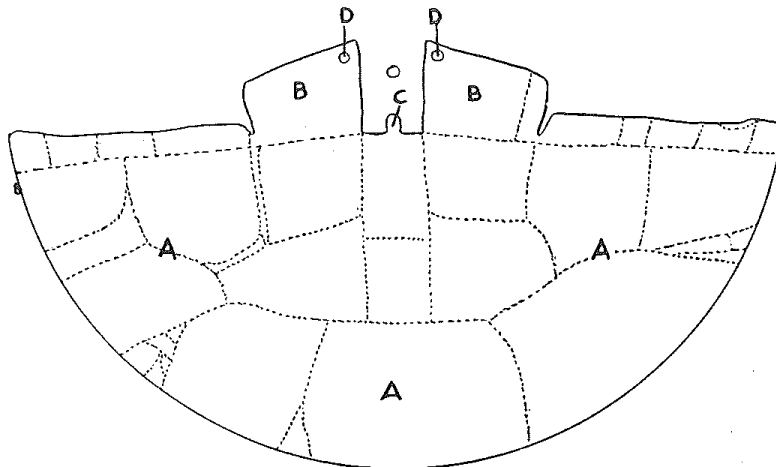


FIG. 3

No. 1 and 2. THE PLAINS TIPI—Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History

No. 3. A HIDE TIPI COVER—Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History

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THE PLAINS INDIAN TIPI

THE PLAINS INDIANS may be defined as those tribes which ranged between the Rockies and the Missouri River from northern Texas to southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. While conical tents were used throughout all of Canada but the western side, they were not of the type used by the Plains tribes.

TUPI (Tee-pee) is a Sioux word which is applied to the tents of all the Plains tribes. *Ti* means "dwelling" and *pi* means "used for." Thus the word tipi means "it is used for a dwelling." Of course each tribe had its own word for the tipi. In the central and northern portions of the area the tipi was the only dwelling used. On the east it was sometimes used by the Earth Lodge tribes and on the west by the Brush Shelter peoples. It is impossible to say how long the tipi has been used, because it was developed before the coming of the white men. But from tribal legends it is indicated that it is not an extremely ancient form of dwelling. The tipi is in use today but it is disappearing.

POLES are made of lodge-pole pine, cedar, spruce and other straight, slim trees. Flexible poles are avoided. The trees are cut down, peeled and dressed down, usually to the heart wood. Most of this was woman's work, though men helped sometimes. The poles are from 10 to 40 feet long, with about 25 feet as an average, and taper from a diameter of from 2 to 6 inches near the butt, which is sharpened. Crow poles are the longest. Poles are kept as long as possible and become dark and polished from smoke and handling. They are worth about \$2.00 each and are not sold willingly.

COVERS were made of dressed cow buffalo hides until the destruction of the herds in the eighties. Since then canvas has been used, though some covers have been made of domestic cow hides. The buffalo covers were made in the spring of every year. The man killed the necessary animals and his women dressed the hides—removing the hair—and prepared a quantity of sinew thread and bone awls. A number of other women were then called in to sew the hides together, under the direction of some woman skilled in the process. Care was taken to avoid waste in the sewing. This work was usually done in one day. The cover is a rough half circle (A) with two ears projecting from the straight side (B). Between them is a small tongue (C). In the inner corners of the ears are holes or pockets (D).

SIZE OF COVERS. There is great variation in size. The average cover was made of 10 to 12 skins, had a radius of about 18 to 20 feet, and weighed about 125 pounds. Canvas covers are much lighter. As many as 50 skins were used, but this was very rare. The size of the cover somewhat depended on the wealth of the family in horses, as several animals were needed to transport a large tipi. The very large covers were sometimes made in two pieces.

PINS AND STAKES are made from slender, strong pieces of wood. The pins are used to fasten the edges of the cover together after it is placed on the poles. They are a foot or two long and are a half inch or less in diameter. The stakes are used to fasten the lower edge of the cover to the ground after it is placed on the poles. A branch with a strong fork on one end is often used. Sometimes iron stakes are found. In winter stones and earth piled against the base of the tipi help the stakes to hold tightly, and keep out moisture and drafts. Some tribes erected their tipis in shallow excavations.

THREE POLE FOUNDATION. This is used by the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Teton Sioux, Assiniboine, Kiowa, Gros Ventre, Plains Cree, Mandan, Arikara, Pawnee, Ponca, Oto and Wichita.

FOUR POLE FOUNDATION. This is used by the Crow, Blackfoot, Sarsi, Shoshoni, Omaha, Comanche, Hidatsa, Kutenai, Flathead and Nez Perce.

ERECTION OF POLES. The process of setting up the tipi is the same for both styles. The cover is spread flat on the ground and the foundation poles are laid on it so as to measure the proper height to tie them together. When this position is determined the poles are marked to avoid this measuring in the future. The poles are next tied together at their crossing with a rope or rawhide band. A long end of the rope is left to serve as an interior guy. There are several varieties of knots, varying by tribe and by the type of set-up. The tied poles are placed on end. In the 3-pole type one pole faces east and forms the south door post. The other two are placed behind the door pole and are nearer to each other than to the door. In the 4-pole set-up the poles form the corners of a rectangle facing east with the short sides east and west. In both types the poles are erected so as to pull the tie very tight. When the foundation is firmly fixed the other poles are put in place. In the 3-pole type the first pole makes the other door post and the next four to six are set up to the north of it. The next group are placed south of the foundation door pole. The remaining go between the two back foundation poles. All but the last group rest in the front or east crotch.

In the 4-pole set-up the poles are set first on the long sides of the rectangle, the easternmost resting in the east crotch and the rest in the north and south crotches. At the east end two poles are placed for the door posts, while at the west end only one pole is first placed, the other being the cover-raising pole. In both types half to two-thirds of the poles rest in the east crotch. There is generally one pole every 30 inches, or about 20 to 25 poles to the average tipi. From 10 to 40 poles are found.

PLACING OF COVER. When all the poles but one are in place this is tied to the small tongue (C) between the ears of the cover and the pole is raised, lifting the cover with it. A guy rope is used to raise the heavy load. The pole is placed in the west crotch. The two sides of the cover are pulled around the poles until they meet in front. The left or south side is laid over the other and the two are pinned together with wooden pegs, which are put in from right to left. They are about six inches apart and extend from the bottom of the smoke hole, which comes part way down the east front of the tipi, to the top of the door. Sometimes the door sill is high, so that the pins are also used below it. After the pins are in place the women enter the tent and push the poles out against the cover, until there is no sagging. When all is tight the bottom edge of the cover is staked to the ground. Two women will put up a tipi in about half an hour.

SMOKE HOLE EARS. The cover is sewed in such a way that when it is in place the two ears (B) drop from the peak down the front of the tipi on either side of the smoke hole. When the tipi is set up the holes or pockets in the corners of the ears are caught on two slim poles running up the outside of the tipi from the ground. They hold the ears upright on either side of the smoke hole. Usually the lower ends of the ears are held taut by cords running to a tall pole set up several yards in front of the door. These ears serve to control the draft rising from the tent by keeping the wind from blowing down the smoke hole. By moving

the poles supporting them the ears can be set in accordance with the direction of the wind. In extremely bad weather they can completely close the smoke hole.

APPEARANCE OF TIPI. The completed tipi is an imperfect cone, with the back or west side much steeper than the front. In the Plains area the wind is almost always from the west. For this reason the door and smoke hole always face the east and a large percentage of the poles slope from east to west, bracing against the pressure of the wind on the steep west side. The floor area is not a perfect circle, inclining toward an oval shape in the 3-pole type and much more so in the 4-pole. The 3-pole is firmer, its cover fits better around the back and its smoke hole goes farther down the front. The 4-pole type needs outside guy ropes to keep it erect in a storm. It has two apexes, the lower where the foundation poles cross, and the upper at the intersection of the other poles. As the cover cannot rise above the lower apex it has a larger top hole and a shorter opening down the front than the 3-pole. The 4-pole type is considered more imposing and beautiful than the 3-pole type. When the tipi is new it is nearly white. Smoke and weather gradually darken it, especially toward the top. By spring the skin tipis had become quite translucent, looking like large lanterns when the fire was burning brightly.

SIZE OF TIPI. The average tipi is about 15 to 18 feet high and about 15 feet in diameter at the base. The range in diameter is 8 to 40 feet.

DOOR. There is much variation in the type of door, some tribes using a skin stretched on a wooden frame and suspended over a rather small oval opening, and others favoring a larger opening simply closed with a soft skin or blanket.

INTERIOR. A lining of cloth or skin (E) about 6 feet high is hung around the inside of the tipi. It is fastened to the poles and stretches to the floor. It keeps drafts and damp from those sitting in the tipi. It is usually decorated with paint or beads. On the south side are two beds (F) of skins or blankets, either resting on the ground or on mats of parallel rods tied together at the ends and held above the ground on a frame like a bedstead. These are for the owner and his family. On the north side is a guest bed. At the far end of each bed rises a back rest of slender rods, (G) like that used under the beds. The owner's weapons and medicine bundles are piled at the back opposite the door. Saddles and riding gear lie on one side of the door and household utensils on the other. In the center, somewhat toward the back, is the fireplace, a square of stones set a little into the ground. Some tribes have a small altar behind the fire. Miscellaneous equipment is hung from the poles or tucked away wherever there is room. In the summer the tipi is kept cool by rolling the cover up from the bottom.

DECORATION. On the outer surface large painted decorations were very often placed. These decorations are the property of the tipi owner and are part of his protective medicine. The designs are partly geometric and partly naturalistic, and usually display figures disclosed to the owner in one of those dreams which are so important in the life of the Indian. Bead and quill trimmings were also used. Cloth or hair streamers often hung from the tips of the poles.

CEREMONIES. Some tribes have ceremonial practises connected with the construction of the tipis, while others put them up unaccompanied with this feature. For certain ceremonies special large tipis are erected. Social and political rules regulated the position of the tipis in the village.

Compiled from the following sources by Jean Allard Jeançon and F. H. Douglas:

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For pictures 1, 3, 4, 5, 7. Information on many tribal types, 1, 3, 4, 5. Instructions for making a tipi, 7, 9.