

## THE TRADITIONAL INDIAN TIPI

The tipi was the ultimate dwelling for a transient people like the plains Indians. It enabled its inhabitants to stay warm in winter yet cool in summer. Its design was sturdy and upright. Yet it was also very user friendly in its assembly. Within an hour two women could quite comfortably put one up.

The tipi consisted of a cover made of dressed buffalo hides stitched together with sinew and stretched over a framework of poles. This framework was based around a tripod of extra strong poles that were tied together at the top. This support was then raised into position. Then up to a dozen other poles were leaned against these support poles and tied at the top. Often a rawhide rope would run down from the top of the framework of the tipi. This would attach to an anchor peg, affixed to the ground inside the tipi.

The tipi framework was arranged in a cone shape. It was purposely asymmetrical, however. This asymmetry allowed for more headroom within the tipi, as well as permitting better ventilation as a result of an off-center smoke hole.

The hide covering was put in place by attaching it to a strong lifting pole and lifting it into position. Then the bottom edges would be pinned to the ground. Where the sides of the cover met eight lodge pins would act as a vertical seam. Next, the door flap would also be attached with a lodge pin. The final step in the assembly of the tipi was to insert two poles into the outer flaps of the smoke hole. These poles would stand on the outside of the tipi. These poles were adjusted to change the direction of the opening to compensate for wind direction or to close the hole in the event of rain or snow.

The completed tipi was about 15 feet in diameter. This provided ample living space for the Plains Indian family. The tipi was a place to be respected and a strict [system](#) of behavior governed its use. An open tipi flap was an invitation to enter. If the flap was closed, however, the visitor was to announce his presence and wait for the host to invite him inside. Upon entering the tipi a visitor would always go to the right. If invited to do so by the host, he would sit in the guest position to the left of the head of the family, who would sit at the rear.

It was a no-no to walk between the fire and another person. Rather, it was expected that you would go behind anyone sitting by the fire, who would lean

forward to allow you to pass. Women would never sit cross-legged like men. They would instead sit on their heels or with their legs to one side. When sitting with other men, a younger man would wait for his elders to initiate the conversation. He would, in fact, not speak unless he was invited to do so by his elders. The cleaning of his pipe by the host was the sign for everybody else to exit the tipi.

Prior to the arrival of the horse on the plains, the tipi had to be of sufficient size to be carried from place to place by the women and dogs. With the coming of the horse, however, this changed dramatically. One result was that lodge poles, which used to be only five to six feet high, now extended to an average of fifteen feet. By using three horses the dwelling could now be transported quite comfortably. Two horses would carry the many poles used in constructing the tipi while the third horse carried the heavy buffalo hide covering. By careful and precise folding, the large lodge covering was able to be reduced to a size that would fit nicely across a saddle. Now the portable home was ready to move on – to be remade in a new location in time for bed.