




Tipis of Agate



The seasonally nomadic plains Indians needed a home that was both comfortable and easy to carry. Much of their time was spent on the move, either following game such as the buffalo or harvesting plants, roots, and berries. The tipi was their choice of residence.

During the summer, two tipis are displayed in front of the visitor center. The larger tipi with the triangle opening is the Crow style while the tipi with the round opening is Sioux. (The bottom of the round opening is folded back here to avoid a tripping hazard for visitors exploring the inside of the tipi.) The Sioux style tipi is 12 feet across with 20 foot long poles. The two smoke flaps at the top can be adjusted by moving the two poles attached to them.

The poles for these tipis are Lodgepole pine which were harvested near Centennial, Wyoming. Historically, the Lakota Sioux travelled many miles to harvest the poles that they needed for the construction of their tipis on the treeless plains.

Canvas is used in this tipi, reminiscent of the time period highlighted here at Agate Fossil Beds. By the early 1900s, buffalo hides were no longer plentiful as a major source of building material. Historic pictures in the Cook Collection show the Red Cloud camp site at the Agate Springs Ranch with many tents and tipis made of canvas.

Making the tipi

Today we shop at our favorite stores and markets for our necessities, while the buffalo provided food and materials to make tools, decorations, housing, etc. for the Sioux and other tribes on the Great Plains. Long, straight poles formed a frame that supported a covering made of buffalo hide or canvas.

Small tipis, such as those used on hunting trips, were about 12 feet in diameter and consisted of 8 - 10 hides. An average tipi was 14 - 16 ft. across and consisted of 12 - 14 hides. Each hide could weigh 50 pounds. Summer killed hides were preferred over winter killed as they were thinner and lighter, and the hides from cows were valued as they were more uniform in thickness.

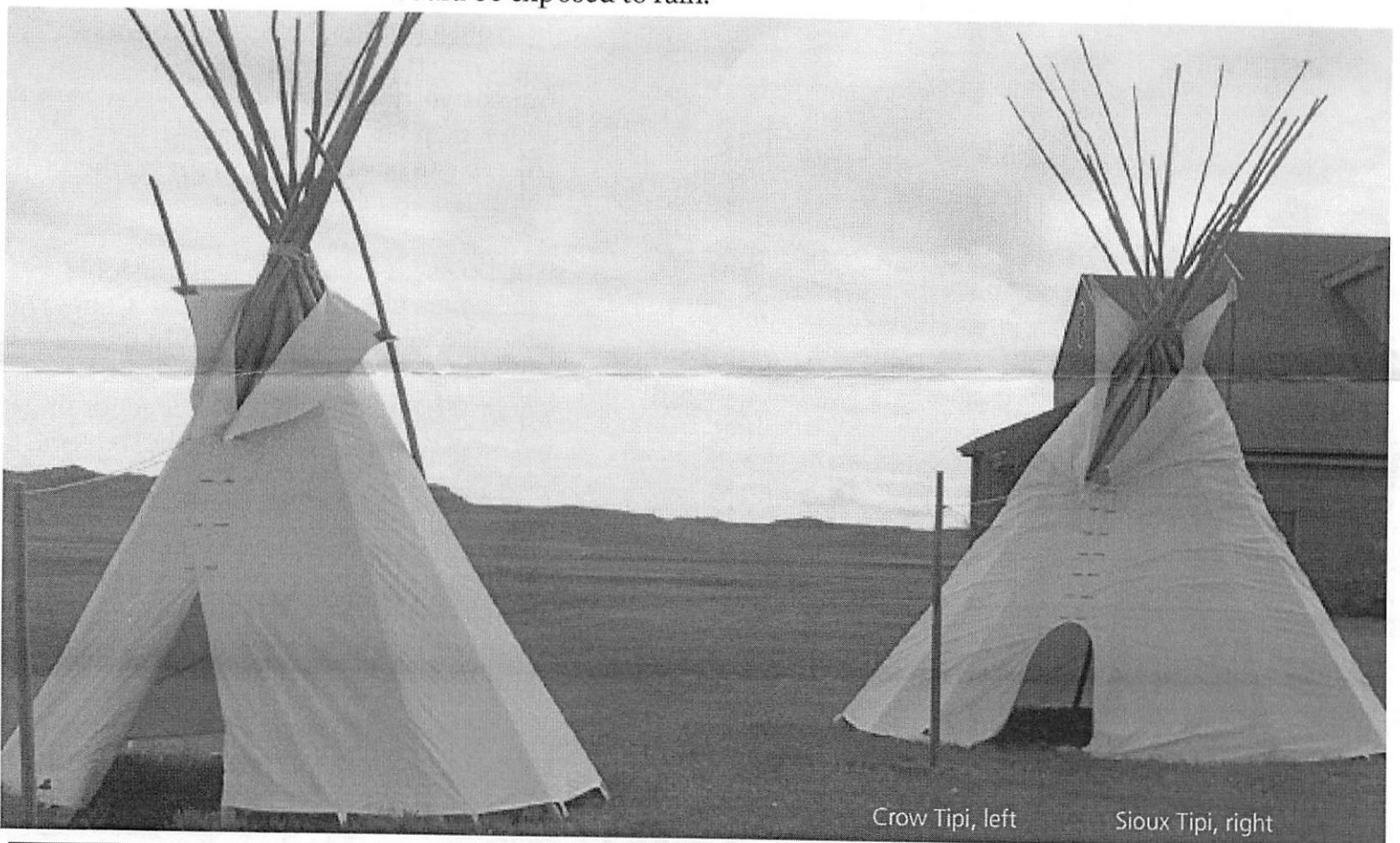
When it was time for a new lodge cover, the woman collected the hides that her husband had taken in the hunt, tanned them, and invited her friends to a tipi-making feast. By accepting her invitation and eating her food, they indicated that they were willing to help. Because of the size and weight of the skins, it was necessary for many women to participate in this "quilting bee" style affair. The hides were laid out on the ground in the shape of the covering needed and sewn together with sinew.

An older woman of experience would supervise the work and think only good thoughts; otherwise the tipi would smoke and be vulnerable to high winds.

Appearance

The brand new hide tipi was pure white. When it was set up for the first time, it was pegged down tightly and the smoke flaps were crossed over in front to close the vent. A smudge fire was built inside to allow the smoke to permeate the entire hide cover. This process helped to make the tipi waterproof and kept it from getting stiff after a soaking. An unsmoked hide would not retain its softness after a complete soaking and water will ruin it. Older tipis darken considerably at the top and eventually wear out. Old lodge covers were used to make moccasins or everyday clothing that would be exposed to rain.

Tipis used by medicine men were often painted on the outside with symbolic designs to protect the owners, families, and even the tribe in general from misfortune and to ensure good hunting. Tipis were also painted to announce that the occupant belonged to a warrior society. Beaded rosettes, wrapped thongs, horse tails, and other items were used as tipi decorations as we use decorations on our houses and in our yards today.



Crow Tipi, left

Sioux Tipi, right