



## Biboon - Winter Lifeways of the Ojibwe



Winter Crossing

Carl Gawboy

### Introduction

*Biboon* (*Bi-boon*) (winter) could often be a harsh season for the Ojibwe (O-ji-bwe) but it was made survivable by the necessity of engaging in a variety of indoor and outdoor tasks. Preparation for the short days and long nights of winter was usually begun in the previous winter, spring, summer and fall. Plant and animal resources to be used for food, medicine, clothing, tools and ceremonial purposes had to be gathered well in advance to assure sustenance and survival.

After the fall hunting, fishing and wild rice gathering were finished, tribal groups would disperse and separate into smaller more easily sustainable family units before moving deeper into the interior winter hunting and trapping grounds.

### Biboon - Lodges

The winter lodges of the Ojibwe were peaked lodges covered with *wiigwaas* (*wii-gwaa-s*) (birch bark). These lodges were sometimes 20 feet long, 10 feet wide and six or seven feet high. The winter lodge is different in design from the cone-shaped peaked lodges of spring and fall because it is intended to house and protect an entire extended family (sometimes three or more generations).

In order to maintain a comfortable life during the winter months, the lodge and family were kept warm by using various methods of insulation, as well as cooking and warming fires and rabbit skin blankets. The winter lodge could be insulated by placing an additional layer of birch bark panels or cattail reed mats on the inside of the lodge. The resulting dead air space could then be filled with moss, fragrant tree boughs and/or surplus furs. It could be further insulated by piling dirt or snow around the outside at the base to keep out drafts. Winter lodges typically had two fire pits inside at each end of the lodge: One for cooking and one for warming. To

provide heat without flame and smoke, rocks were heated at the cook fire and moved to the warming fire pit by using two pieces of deer antler to carry the rocks.

Additional warmth was provided in the winter time by the use of deer, moose, bear and beaver hides that were tanned with the hair left on and by the creation of *waboswainag* (*wa-boo-zo-waa-nag*) (rabbit skin blankets). Robes nearly six feet square were made from the skins of rabbits that were trapped in the winter after their hair had turned white. Caps, neck scarves, mittens and wrappings for the ankles were also made of rabbit skin.



Winter Lodge

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### Surviving *Biboon*

The primary winter activities of Ojibwe men were hunting and trapping animals for food and fur. They also spent time ice fishing using hooks and spears fashioned from carved bone and wood. Time was also spent making and repairing hunting tools and equipment. Two of the most im-

portant winter survival tools for the Ojibwe people were the *nabogidaabaan* (*na-ba-gi-daa-baan*) (toboggan) and *agi-mag* (*Aa-gi-mag*) (snowshoes). Toboggan is a mispronunciation of the *Anishinabe* (*Ojibwe*) words *nobug* (*na-bag*) (flat) and *daban* (*daa-baan*) (drag). These

flat-bottom carrying tools were made of hardwood like *wiigwaasi-mitig* (*wii-gwaa-si-mi-tig*) (birch tree) that is cut in the winter when its sap is not flowing. The curved front end of the toboggan is heated and shaped by pouring boiling water over it. These seven to 10 foot long carrying tools were very narrow because the trails made and followed by the Ojibwe were narrow, usually 12 to 14 inches across. One or two people would drag the carrier by using a strap or *tump line* around their chest and the ends of the strap or line attached to the front edge of the carrier.



The work of walking through the snow and pulling a toboggan load of meat or furs was made easier by the use of *agi-mag* (*Aa-gi-mag*) (snowshoes). These tools were invented by the native peoples of North America. They were of the utmost importance to winter work and survival. Snowshoes were made from a



The Northwest Gun

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strip of freshly split ash wood that had been curved either by warming over a fire or by pouring hot water over it. The two ends were then tied together. This made the shape resemble the outline of a fish or of a beaver's tail. Two wooden cross bars would be added for strength and the open sections would be filled in with rawhide thongs woven in a hexagonal pattern using a needle made of bone or wood. A strip of rawhide tied across the top of the foot and another tied across the heel held the snowshoe in place.

## Activities of Ojibwe Women During *Biboon*



The Storyteller

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When the men returned to their lodges and families, they would find the women engaged in their usual and accustomed winter activities. During the winter the women used their time to make eating and cooking utensils and food containers like *wiigwaasi-makuk* (birch bark baskets). They fashioned clothing and foot wear from deer and moose hides they had tanned in the fall. They decorated their work with intricate designs made from

porcupine quills.

*Biboon*, though sometimes harsh, was a time of peace and introspection for the Ojibwe people. It was a time for togetherness and teaching. This was traditionally the time for the children to hear the *aadizookaanag* (*Aa-di-soo-kaa-nag*) (legends) of how the *Anishinabeg* (*Ani-shi-naa-beg*) (*Ojibwe*) came to be, how they received the gifts of fire, birch bark, tobacco and *mahnomin* (*ma-noo-min*) (wild rice). Tradition tells that when a well known relative of the *Anishinabeg* leaves his human form and takes the shape of *wabooz* (*waa-booz*) (the snowshoe hare), when he sits down and lights his pipe, when the smoke rises and the snow falls, that is when the legends are heard.

## The End of *Biboon*

The Ojibwe people knew winter was over when *Aandeg* (*aan-deg*) (crow) came home. Then it was time to leave the interior. It was time to move to the sugar-bush. It was time to tap the maple trees. They had survived the winter and now had three full seasons to prepare for winter again.

With the arrival of the Europeans and the fur trade, the nature of winter and its survivability changed. Wool blankets and cloth made winter warmer and drier. Wire snares and iron spears made trapping easier. Brass kettles and tin plates made food preparation and storage more convenient. Conversely, the increased demand for labor and furs made winter survival, already difficult, harder as finite energies focused more on trapping. The separation of families caused by European men moving or abandoning their "mixed blood" families



Sugarbush

Carl Gawboy

as they rose in the North West Company was an additional hardship. The introduction of alcohol made survival even worse. Through all these challenges the *Anishinabeg* survived. They continue to survive today, here, at *Gitchi-Onigaming* (The Great Carrying Place) - Grand Portage.