

# Knife River Indian Villages

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site  
North Dakota



## The Earthlodge



The Hidatsa lived in earth and wood structures called “awahte” or earthlodges. Because of their successful mastery of agriculture, this tribe was able to maintain a relatively non-migratory village life. Villages of up to 120 earthlodges were constructed on the terrace above the Missouri and Knife Rivers. These permanent dwellings were owned and maintained by the women of the tribe.

### Construction

One woman would serve as the builder and supervise the construction of the earthlodge. She was given a soft, tanned buffalo hide, a large wooden bowl of meat and other items in return for her services.

Cottonwood posts and beams were cut by the women with stone tools and carried up to the village. The builder would mark out the floor plan and where each post hole was to be dug. The post holes were carefully excavated with digging sticks and horn scoops so that the posts would all be the same height when raised into place. The four central posts and crossbeams were erected with the help of the men. After this was done, a feast was given of the best foods to thank the men for their help.

The women then erected the outer circle of posts and cross beams, leaned split logs to form a wall and lifted the rafters into place. On top of this framework a layer of willow branches was laid, and then

covered with a matting of dried prairie grass. Then the entire structure was covered in a thick layer of cut sod.

The finished lodge would be between 30 to 60 feet in diameter and 10 to 15 feet high. It took approximately 7 to 10 days to complete an earthlodge from start to finish, and it would last around 10 years. After the lodge was completed, a feast was given to thank all who had assisted.

When it came time to take down an earthlodge, the women would climb up and, starting at the top, use their hoes to scrape off the earth. All the materials that could be salvaged were saved to use in the construction of the new lodge. The embedded upright posts were the reason that the lodges needed to be rebuilt every 10 years. The dampness in the sub floor would begin to rot the cottonwood logs from the inside out. These were hacked down and the remains burned out of the ground.

### Inside

#### Inside the Earthlodge

The center of the earthlodge roof is left open to allow smoke out and light in. In the event of heavy rain or snow, a bullboat (the round boat made of a single buffalo hide stretched on a willow frame) could be turned over the smoke hole and propped up to allow smoke to escape. The fire area was a sunken depression located under this hole. A partition was constructed just inside the doorway to shield the occupants and the fire from wind.

An earthlodge housed 10 to 20 people, usually sisters and their families. The beds were located around the outer ring, in the areas between the support poles. Personal items were kept under one's bed. General use items for the lodge occupants were kept on raised platforms similar to the bed frames. If more room was needed and it was not time to construct a new

earthlodge; a smaller lodge could be built adjacent to the main lodge and connected with a short passage. This was called a twinning lodge.

#### Horses in the House

Corrals for horses were built inside the earthlodge. Only the best and most prized war and hunting ponies were brought in at night to protect them from theft and harsh weather. Stallions and mares were kept on opposite sides of the door.

#### Sweatlodges

Sweatlodges are an important part of Hidatsa life. A small sweatlodge was built inside the lodge, usually to the right of the entrance near the corral. The sweatlodge is used for both ceremonial and practical purposes by the Hidatsa.

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## Inside Continued

### Furnishings

Beds were raised platforms of wooden boards covered in buffalo robes. Pillows were made of old hides and stuffed with animal hair or grass. Beds for adults also had a canopy made from an old tipi skin and decorated with the honor marks of the husband. The canopy provided privacy for the occupants. Other raised platforms were used as storage for items that needed to be off the floor such as bowls and spoons.

The atuka is a high-sided seat near the fire. It is a place of honor and usually occupied by the oldest man in the household, but offered to visitors as a sign of respect.

### Storage

The cache pit is a large bell-shaped hole in the floor that serves as a root cellar. Lined with grass and willows, it provided safe storage for the dried harvest of corn, beans, sunflowers and squash. The cache

pit was covered over and made to look like the rest of the floor unless food was actively being taken out. There were several cache pits inside and outside each earthlodge.

Parfleches are rawhide containers used to store a variety of items such as clothes, dried foods, trade items, craft materials and hides. They are brightly painted, and often suspended from the ceiling by leather thongs. A disc of rawhide placed halfway up the thong kept rodents from climbing into the parfleche and provided protection from water damage in the event of a leak in the roof.

### Shrine

At the back of the lodge can be found the shrine. The Hidatsa were very spiritual people and kept many sacred bundles. The shrines varied in size, depending on what space was needed to care for the sacred objects it would house. The area between the shrine and the fire was sacred and not to be passed through.

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## The Reconstruction

The Earthlodge now used in interpretation of the Hidatsa culture at Knife River Indian Villages NHS was built in 1995 by Yellowstone Traditions in cooperation with the National Park Service.

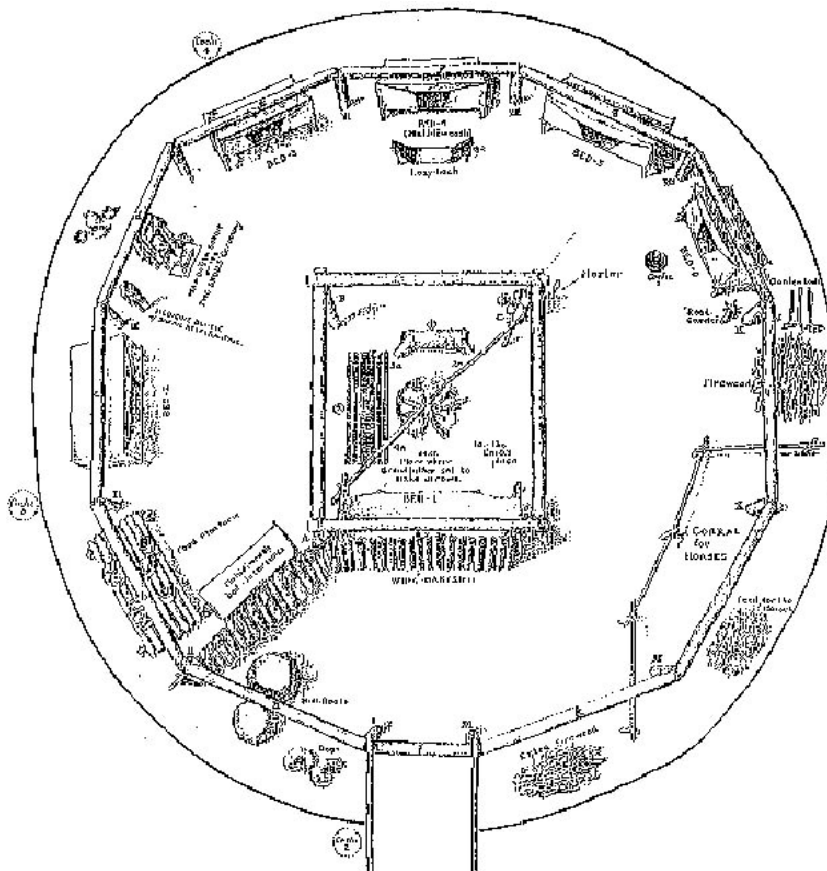
The 40 foot diameter earthlodge was built using traditional materials such as cottonwood, willow, douglas fir, prairie cord grass, and earth. The construction also incorporates modern technology. A concrete foundation ensures structural integrity and also helps alleviate any water damage to the support pillars.

Electricity allows for monitoring equipment and equipment to clean and maintain the lodge to be used. A synthetic roof liner installed between the earth and grass layers insures that a leak will not ruin the exhibit. A plexiglass dome over the smokehole lets light in, but helps keep weather and animals out.

The result is a full-scale exhibit that gives visitors a chance to view the historical homes of the Hidatsa in a unique and informative way.

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## Diagram of a Traditional Interior



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Log and frame houses began to replace the earthlodge in the late 1800's and today the descendants of the earthlodge-dwellers live in modern-style homes on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation.