




[First Peoples Menu](#)
[The Canada Site .com](#)
[Boer War Museum](#)
[Coming Back Alive](#)
[Goldi Productions Ltd](#)
[The Store](#)

[First Peoples](#)
[Contact & Conflict](#)
[Treaties & Change](#)
[The Metis & Rebellion](#)
[Production Credits](#)

[Email Us](#)

The Plains People

[Groups in the Plains People](#)

[Food / Hunting / Tools](#)

[Transportation / Migration](#)

[Religion / Ceremonies / Art / Clothing](#)

[Family / Social Structure / Leadership](#)

[Tribal Relations / War](#)

From the Rocky Mountains to the woodlands of Southeastern Manitoba, the native people of the plains spanned the Southern provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

The Environment

- To the East, high grass covers the prairies. To the West, short grasses, sage and cacti.
- Weather extremes; cold winters (-40 degrees Celsius) and hot summers (35 degrees Celsius)
- Forests and foothills are scattered at the base of the Rocky Mountains, along hills and rivers
- Some Rivers (ex. Assiniboine, Saskatchewan River, Red River etc.) and streams
- Large herds of buffalo, deer, antelope, along with bears, cougars, coyotes
- Smaller animals like jack rabbits, prairie dogs, small herbivores, grouse, geese, ducks, cranes, eagles



The Plains



The Red River



The Rocky Mountain Foothills

Settlements and Housing

- Settlements were divided into bands made up of 50 to 100 members, connected by marriage or kinship.
- Male leaders, recognized in their hunting, oratory, religious or medical skills, guided the bands.
- Each band had a headman who led by example.
- Animal hide shelters were easily constructed or portable, and therefore provided living quarters.
- Each band probably had about 30 to 40 tipis.
- During the summer, 1000s of people from bands joined together within their tribes to hunt buffalo and

perform religious ceremonies.



Plains Encampment



Stoney Tipi

Housing - the Tipi

- A tall, cone-like structure made from hides; the Tipi was waterproof and weather-hardy.
- The tipi was warm in winter and cool in summer.
- Through the top, light filtered to fill the interior.
- Fur line hides covered the ground, keeping it warm.
- The head of the family always sat opposite to the door flap.
- Triangular back rests made with willow and bound together with cord, made sitting more comfortable.
- The hearth fire was built just behind the centre of tipi, towards the back.
- The pine tipi poles used to make the tipis were precious, because wood was scarce, since there were so few trees in the plains. The tipi poles were carefully protected and carried from place to place usually on a horse travois.

Structure and Design of the Tipi

- Circular floor plan represented the cycle of nature: earth, sky, seasons and life itself.
- The design on a tipi was given to its owners in a dream or vision, usually showing events of humans, animals, or birds, on sides of tipis.
- The side design usually depicted human, bird or animal events.
- The bottom skirt area symbolized the earth's surface.
- The top of tipi represented symbolized father sky.



Typical example of a decorated tipi

Setting up a Tipi

- Women made, owned and erected the tipis.
- Three or four foundation poles were tied together with a piece of rawhide and raised.
- Poles were placed to make the tipi slightly steeper at the back, making it sturdier, and more able to withstand strong wind.
- The last pole to go up was placed at the back.
- A carefully sewn buffalo hide cover was then carefully fitted over the poles.
- A hole to let the smoke was left at the top and could be regulated with two flaps attached to two long poles.
- The fire pit was in the centre of the tent, with the beds arranged around the walls of the tipi.
- The door always faced the rising sun, which acted as an alarm clock when it rose.
- The long end of the rawhide was staked to the ground to secure the foundation poles.
- Heavy stones were gathered to hold down the bottom edge of the tent covering to prevent the tipi from being



Woman in front of tipi, partly-constructed tipi in background

blown down by the wind. When a tipi was taken down the stones were rolled away and the people moved on. These heavy stones were always left behind. Today it is easy to find locations where plains Indian villages once stood. The tent rings of stones they left behind can be found on many hills or beside rivers all over the empty prairies of western Canada.

[Groups in the Plains People](#)

[Food / Hunting / Tools](#)

[Transportation / Migration](#)

[Religion / Ceremonies / Art / Clothing](#)

[Family / Social Structure / Leadership](#)

[Tribal Relations / War](#)

[Back to the top](#)

[Back to Canada's First Peoples Menu](#)

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