Tepees

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BELIEVE it or not, there was a time when few Indians had painted tepees and the right to a painted tepee was most jealously guarded. As late as the 1900's, it was difficult to obtain such a tepee except in fulfilment of a vow and the ceremony of transfer was most exacting or dire trouble would fall upon him who erred the slightest in the ceremonial transfer. With the painted tepee, of course, went the proper songs and the medicine bundle with the power of that particular spirit protector.

A war chief might of course decorate his tepee with pictographs of his successful adventures; even a famous warrior might also record his achievements or those of his tribe. But the tepees which carried the "power" or "medicine" were

The tepee itself seems to represent an adaptation of convenience to changing circumstances. Even on the Plains, before horses became common, the Indians lived in shelters altogether different and permanent in nature. But the advent of the horse gave the Indian mobility to range far and wide in pursuit of the all-essential buffalo — to say nothing of mobility in war. To follow the buffalo herds, a convenient shelter had to be devised. The tepee was the answer.

Early travellers among the Plains Indians seem to credit the Sioux tribes with the perfection of the tepee; the most artistic were said to be developed by the Crows but the Blackfoot tribes developed symbolism and ritual to the highest perfection.

Along with the horse came the adaptation of the dog-travois to the horse travois. By this means, tepee, utensils, furniture, even children and puppies could be speedily moved from one encampment to another and the poles necessary for the frame were moved far out into the plains far from the wooded foothills. The Plains Indian was now footloose to roam at will.

Originally made of buffalo hides, tanned sometimes almost to parchment whiteness and ingeniously sewn with sinew, the tepee made the most healthful type of shelter for any season of the year. The ears at the apex of the coneshaped home prevented the smoke from the central fire from remaining in the tepee itself for they could be adjusted by poles to any wind that blows; the inner wall, extending about four feet, from the ground and fastened to the poles, gave ventilating space and added protection from drafts. The fire was placed in a

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small hole directly under the top of the cone; usually, the fire place was surrounded by stones to keep fire from spreading and to give convenience in cooking either by kettle or broiling.

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Tepees are properly pitched with the door opening to the east. Some will maintain that this is in honor of the all-powerful sun, so venerated as the symbol of the Creative Spirit. But it could also be that on the Plains the prevailing winds come from the westerly directions. Therefore, placing the doorway to the east would lessen the drafts. But it is an artistic and poetic touch, as well as a fine way to preserve the custom, to ascribe this position as one that honors the sun. It reveals the innate artistry and imagination of an artistic and imaginative people who are spiritually alive and deeply religious

are spiritually alive and deeply religious. The door is usually oval, its lower edge about a foot from the ground and covered originally by a skin attached to the body of the tepee at the top of the opening. From the top of the door, to the place where the ears open, the two sides of the tepee are fastened together by pegs of wood or bone. One must not forget that the entire covering is in one piece for ease of handling. Occasionally now, and frequently in the old days, the medicine bundle of that particular tepee was fastened above the door. The outer edge of the tepee is pegged to the ground, but, in olden times, sometimes a wall of sod surrounded the outer edge and stones held down the edges of the skins. One can still see these tepee circles of stone in various places, especially just across the river from Writing-on-Rock, north of Coutts, where they are very numerous. Some early travellers and traders record that sod-walls were used in winter as an additional windbreak.

But the important matter is the painted exterior. Around the base is a dark ring to represent earth. Here one or two parallel rows of circles in white are painted. These represent puffballs which some tribes called "dusty stars" believing that they were stars which fell to earth and changed into these plants. The puffball, it is said, was also significant since, when dried furnished quick kindling for fires.

From the upper edge of this dark ring to the upper cone is often left white or sometimes painted a dusky yellow or brown shade. This part was reserved for the pictographs representing the successful deeds and high adventures of the owner. This part also, in the important medicine tepees, carried the animal or bird which was the especial guardian of the tepee and from whom the medicine and songs belonging to the tepee had come. This symbol had come from a vision or dream in which the animal depicted had appeared to the owner and talked with him. The wolf, the bear, the beaver, the otter and the eagle were the more

common guardians. Each differed from the others and each had its particular origin. Thus, there might be several Otter tents but each was individual.

The upper cone symbolized the sky at night and was usually dark in color. On it, various constellations and symbols might be painted. Almost every tent bears the five stars of the Pleiades, the seven stars of the Dipper. These constellations were, of course, the important sky markers of the night. With each, is a legend, the five lost children and the seven brothers, legends common to almost every plains tribe. On this also sometimes appeared the crescent moon and the maltese cross, symbolizing the evening star. A few bore the stylised butterfly, the sleep-bringer.

The "totem", if one may use that term, was important as it plainly identified the medicine or power of the owner. Even as Christians wear the cross to identify themselves with the spirit of Christ, so the painting on the tepee identified the source of the owner's inner strength.

Whenever a tepee of this sort changed hands, the new owner acquired the tepee song and the medicine bundle. In some tribes the owner was obligated to sell when someone had vowed to acquire the medicine bundle. Again, sometimes death or disaster was interpreted as signifying that the power had passed from the owner for misbehaviour of some sort. Then the tepee was destroyed. When it was necessary to replace a tepee, a new one could be painted with appropriate ceremonies and dedicated, but the old one had to be offered to the sun as a sacrifice Usually, it was sunk in the nearest large body of water.

While few Indians today attach much significance to the spiritual and mystical meaning of the paintings, they still keep the traditional design and use it with the same pride that a noble family displays its coat-of-arms or its crest. The owners of the painted tepees are the aristocracy of the Plains Indians.

References: American Bureau of Ethnology Reports — 1880, 1891, 1892, George Catlin — North American Indians — 1840 D. W. Harmon — 1810.

