

The Tipi: Traditional Native American Shelters

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“There were fifty tents made of tanned hides, very bright red and white in color and bell-shaped, with flaps and openings, and built as skillfully as those of Italy,” described Don Juan de Onate in his report on a Spanish expedition to the American Southwest in 1599.

This book is an introduction to the dwelling structure best known by the Sioux word “tipi.” The text—examining tipi life in the Native American Indian tribes of four distinct geographic areas—is drawn from a variety of published sources and is accompanied by numerous photographs, most gathered by the author over the course of what he terms “a forty-year life-long project.”

Hungrywolf has written more than fifty books—on nature, Native cultures, history, and railroading—many while homesteading with his family in the Canadian Rockies. For more than three decades, he has been a student of the traditional ways of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the heritage of his wife and sometimes co-author, Beverly. He presents narrative from sources as diverse as Spanish explorers, a fur trader with the North-West Company in 1804, the recollections of Buffalo-Bird-Woman (born about 1840 in the Hidatsa culture), and German explorer and naturalist Prince Maximilian of Wied during his 1832—1833 expedition.

It’s interesting to note the basic similarities among the distinct tribes: the sleeping arrangements of family members in the tipi, the reverence and ceremony associated with the designs and symbols painted on the tipi, and the relationship between females and their home. For example, according to one anthropological source cited, in the Plains Cree culture, “Women made the tipi, set it up, owned it. Therefore, a man had to get his wife’s consent to have a picture of his spirit helper drawn on the tipi cover.” Meanwhile, in the Flathead tribe of the Northern Rockies, “The women made and in theory owned the tents.”

There’s a taste of rich history here, but it’s only presented in bites of tempting background information; it leaves the reader wanting to sample (and learn) more. A small list of definitions might have been useful, but the sources cited and the in-depth index are very helpful.

Added bonuses include very detailed explanations of the photos included, and sections on specific subjects such as painted tipis, sweat lodges, and how to build a tipi. The tipis seen by Spanish explorers in 1599 so intrigued the visitors that de Onate reported, “The Sergeant Mayor bartered for a tent and brought it” back with him.

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