

NOTES ON LODGE PLANS IN THE LAKE
INDICATOR AREA OF SOUTH-CENTRAL QUEBEC*

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From July 1953 until July 1954, the author and his wife conducted ethnographic field work among the Mistassini Cree of south-central Quebec. During the course of this work, we accompanied Alfie Matoush and members of his hunting group to their lands for the winter. The area exploited by this group is near the headwaters of the Eastmain River and just south of Lake Noakokan. Near the southern boundary lies Lake Indicator, which appears to have been used frequently as an early winter base for hunting and trapping. Here several house pits and log cabins were observed and information regarding them obtained from the leader of the hunting group.

The purpose of this paper is to place on record data that may some day be of use to those who undertake archaeological investigations in this and other areas within the eastern Subarctic. Furthermore, it seems appropriate to record these data since it is possible to link ethnographic accounts with what may be called archaeological sites (*see* Drucker 1943, p. 34 and Reichel-Dolmatoff 1961, pp. 229-41). I wish to thank Mr. Kenneth E. Kidd for calling my attention to these two sources and for having commented on the manuscript. Finally, some suggestions can be made regarding changing lodge styles in the area and the factors involved.

Before the lodge remains are discussed, a resume of the yearly activities of the Mistassini may be given. In late August or early September the various hunting groups leave their summer encampment at the lower end of Lake Mistassini and move to their hunting grounds. Here a fall camp is erected from which the men make hunting excursions. In October a more

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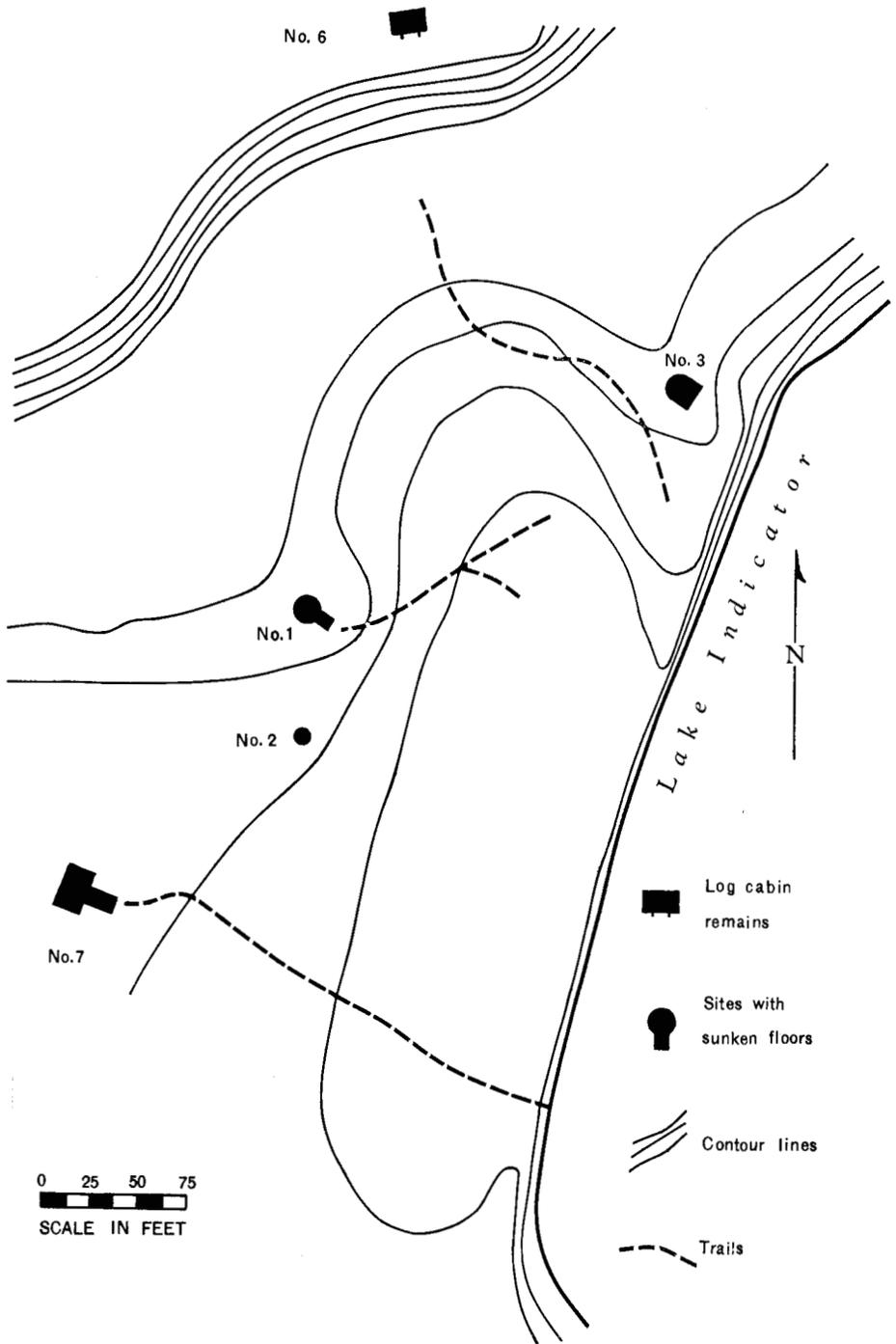


Fig. 1. Lodge sites at Lake Indicator.

substantial early winter camp is established. This is occupied until the first of the year. During the rest of the winter camp is moved as a rule several times to other sections of the group's territory. As spring approaches the group moves back to the vicinity of their early winter camp, where the canoes have been cached. During the latter part of May the hunters leave their lands and return to the settlement at the south end of Lake Mistassini (see Rogers and Rogers 1959, pp. 130-8).

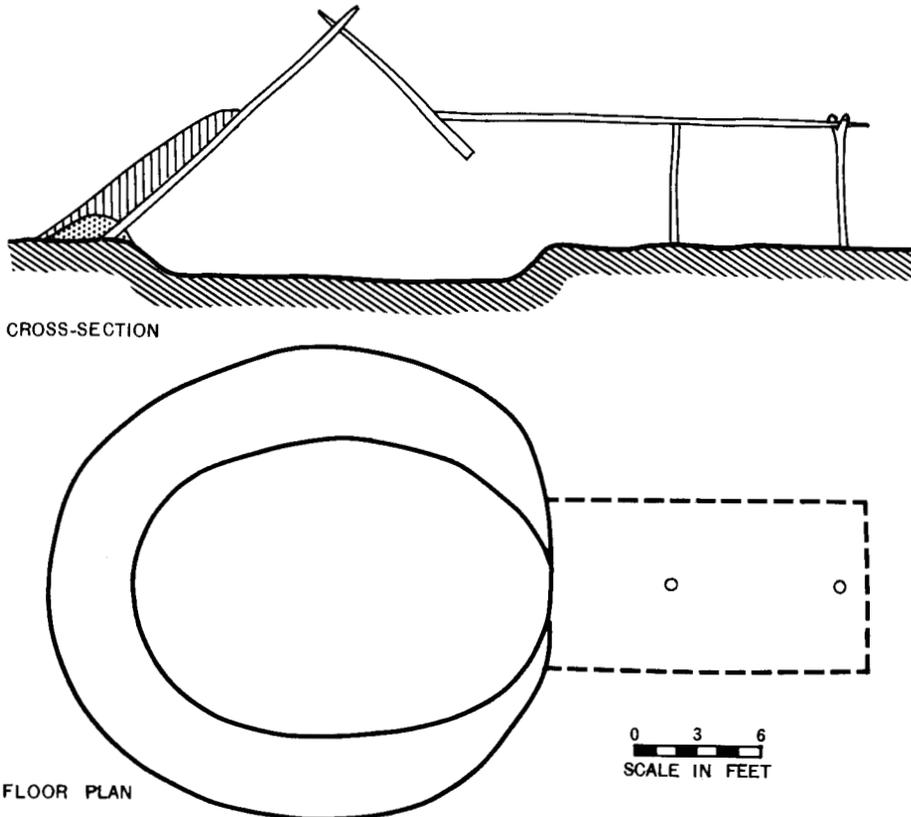


Fig. 2. The earth-covered conical lodge.

The lodge remains are in the vicinity of the Matoush early winter camp of 1953, about mid-way on the west shore of Lake Indicator. In this area we saw the remains of one earth-covered conical lodge, three house pits (a fourth was found on the Temiscamie River), and the remains of one log cabin, as well as a new one erected by the Matoush group (Fig. 1). Accordingly, two (possibly three) types of lodge remains were represented.

The most important remains are perhaps those of the earth-covered conical lodge (Fig. 1, No. 1; Fig. 2), since its time of occupancy can be rather well dated and it can be reconstructed with reasonable accuracy. It was occupied by Alfie Matoush, his parents and siblings, when the former

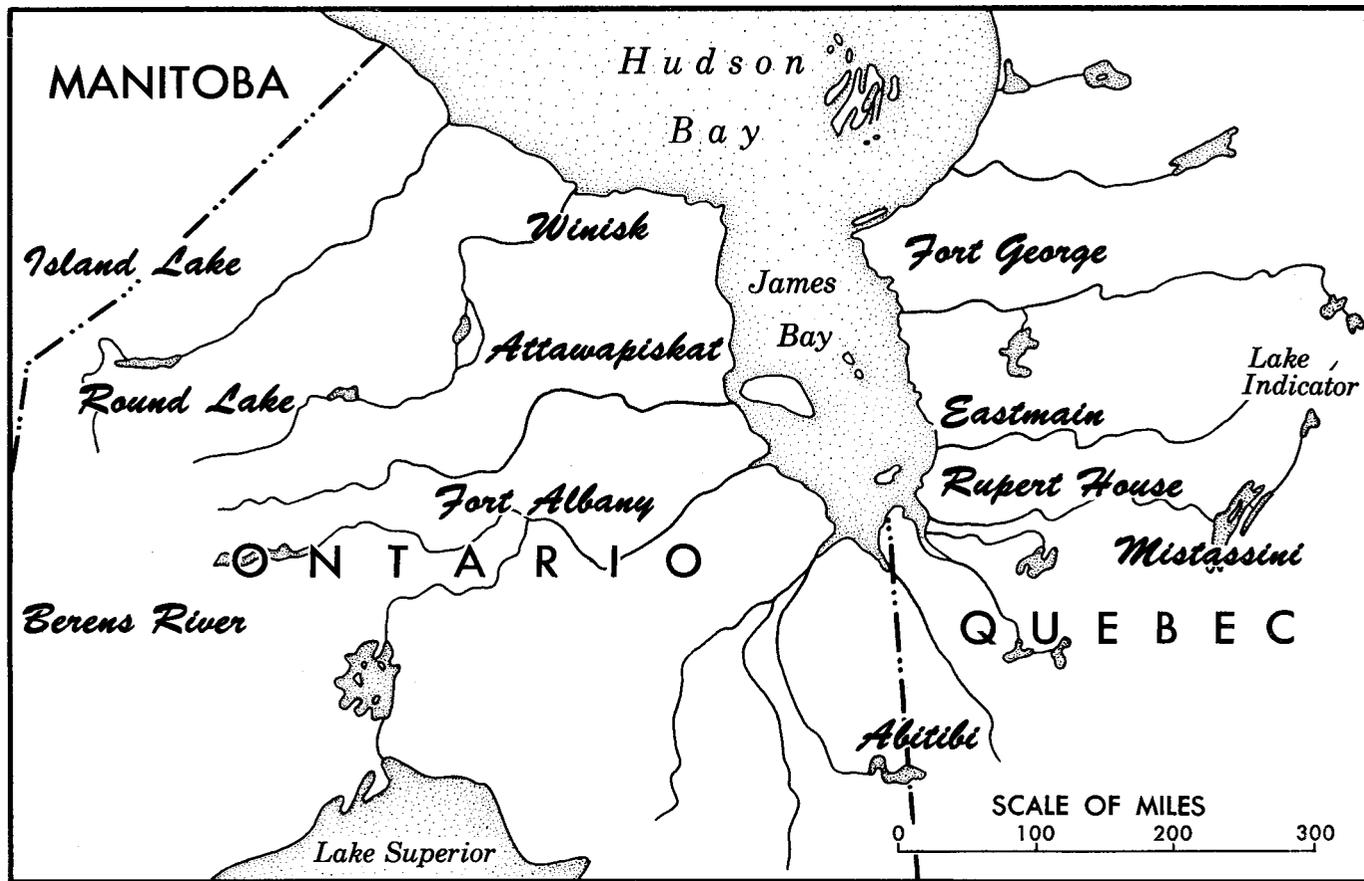


Fig. 3. Sketch map showing the Indian groups who used the earth-covered conical lodge.

was about 5 years old. Since Alfie was in his late thirties or early forties in 1953, the lodge must have been in use between 1915 and 1920.

The ground plan of the lodge is oval, approximately 14 feet wide and 18 feet long. The floor had been excavated to a depth of about 1 foot and the earth that was removed placed about the circumference of the excavation to a height of approximately 1 foot. Poles, probably black spruce, had been placed butt ends first into the embankment, close together and extending upward at an angle to meet over the centre of the excavated area, forming a conical structure. A number of these poles remained partly in place. Occasionally, the poles had been split in half lengthwise. They projected beyond the point of juncture for several inches. The apex of the structure was about 12 feet above the excavated floor. The structure was said to have been chinked with moss and then covered with a layer of earth about half way (perhaps farther) up the sides. The top half was said to have been covered with tarpaulins except for a smoke hole at the centre. Inside, the floor had been thickly carpeted with boughs except at the centre, where there was a small fire place. Near the entrance, which was located at the centre of one end, was a stove. No evidence of the stove or fire place remained.

Extending out from the doorway was a porch, rectangular in outline and measuring approximately 8 feet wide and 14 feet long. A ridge pole extended the length of the porch, being secured to the lodge proper, to a stake at the centre, and a crotched pole in front. The height to the ridge pole was about 6 feet. The sides were of horizontal logs and, it was said, several feet high. The roof was of canvas placed over the ridge pole and secured to the tops of the log walls.

This type of lodge was stated to be no longer in use and none were seen during several summers spent in the area. According to informants, the earth-covered conical lodge was used only from October to January during the period of early winter trapping. And it was only at this time of year that the lodge floor would be excavated.

It may be appropriate to delineate here the known distribution of this type of lodge in the eastern Subarctic. It has been reported from the east coast of James Bay at the Eastmain River Post (Skinner 1911, p. 13) and the lower Rupert River (Rogers and Rogers 1948, p. 84; Plate VIII, No. L). A variant covered with "brush" was observed on the coast north of Fort George (Leith and Leith 1912, p. 177). No other reports for the Montagnais-Naskapi have been found. There are several for the Cree-Ojibwa of northern Ontario: at the mouth of the Winisk River (Miller 1912, p. 134); along the Albany River (Dean 1957, p. 60); for the Round Lake Ojibwa (Rogers 1962, p. A25), and for the Attawapiskat Cree (Honigmann 1956, pp. 42-3; 1961, p. 85) and Abitibi (Jenkins 1939, p. 25) and in eastern Manitoba at Island Lake (Hallowell 1938, p. 134) and Berens River (Hallowell 1938, p. 134, note 3) (Fig. 3).

Godsell has published a photograph of a lodge of this type but unfortunately its provenience is not given (1932, p. 55).

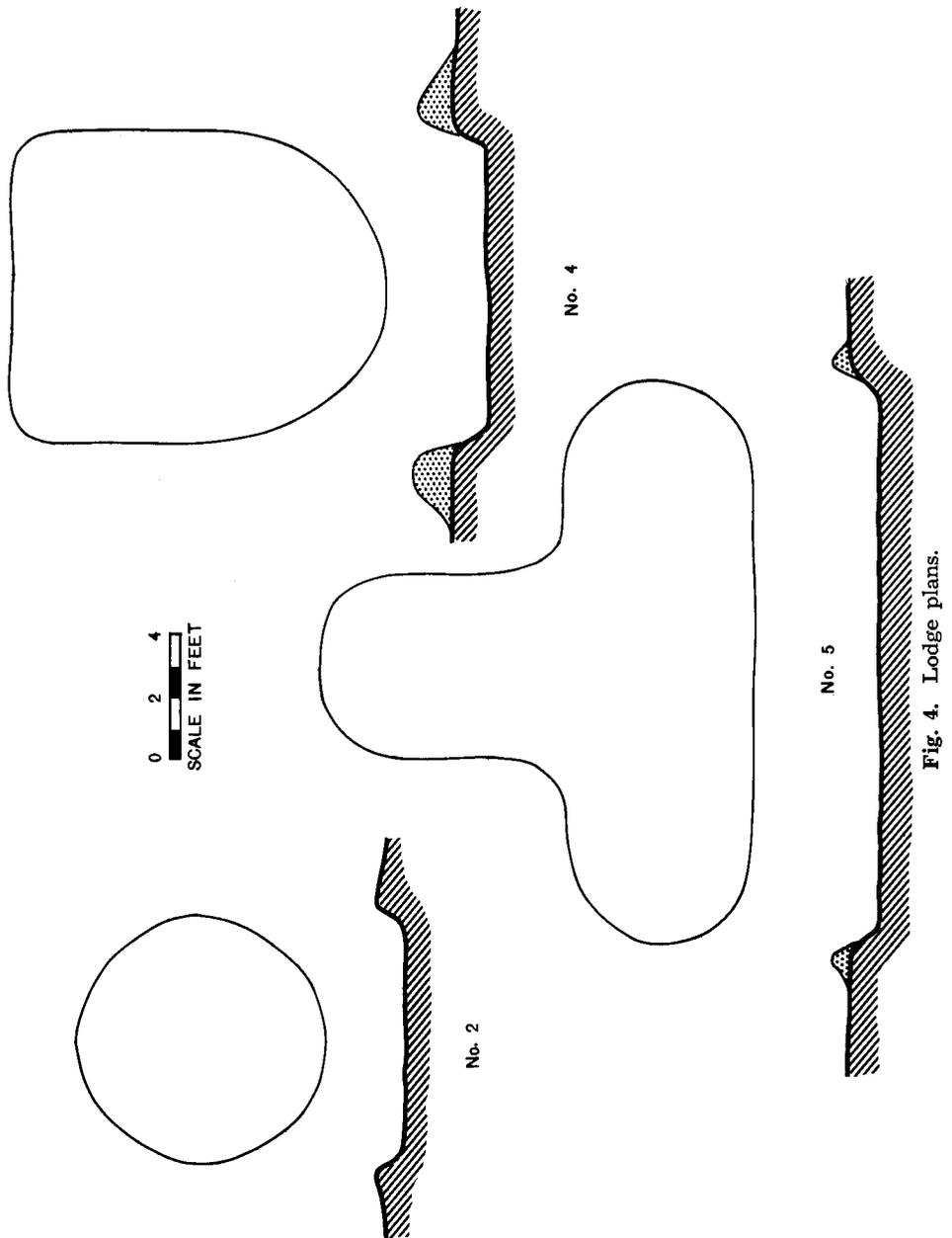


Fig. 4. Lodge plans.

Near the earth-covered conical lodge are three other house pits, which lack a super-structure. The first of these lies to one side of the earth-covered conical lodge. It is a circular depression (Fig. 1, No. 2; Fig. 4, No. 2) about 6 feet in diameter and about 8 inches deep with a rim raised several inches high. It was said to be the remains of a conical lodge, but whether earth-covered or not could not be ascertained.

A second house pit (Fig. 1, No. 3) to the northeast of the earth-covered conical lodge is much closer to the lake. This pit is roughly horseshoe-shaped in outline, about 12 by 12 feet and about 8 inches deep. Little evidence is left of a rim about the circumference except here and there, and none of the remains of a porch. The site is overgrown with shrubs and lichens. To all appearances it is older than the earth-covered conical lodge, and only a few poles of the structure remain. Yet some of these show signs of having been cut with iron axes. It may have been occupied as much as 50 to 75 years ago, but probably not earlier. Presumably it had been an earth-covered conical lodge, but no concrete evidence for this could be discovered.

Several hundred yards to the southwest of the earth-covered conical lodge is a third house pit (Fig. 4, No. 4). It is similar in outline to No. 3, Fig. 1, but had been excavated to a slightly greater depth than any of the others, being 12 to 15 inches deep. Several poles of the superstructure remained, and were lying in the interior. It had been most likely a conical lodge and probably been earth-covered, but of this one could not be sure. There were stakes at the centre of the floor for the support of a stove, as is in use today. The door apparently had been in the centre of one long side.

Another house pit (Fig. 4, No. 5) was found on the west bank of the Temiscamie River just south of where the stream discharging from Lac Bethoulet enters. The ground plan is trilobate and excavated to a depth of perhaps a foot. The door may have been at the centre of the long side. There was no evidence of a frame, which may have rotted away or been taken for use elsewhere. The lodge was located rather close to the river bank.

One other house type, the log cabin, remains to be mentioned. At the site under discussion are examples, both of more recent date than the house pits. The floor plans are rectangular and not excavated, the ground had been merely levelled. One (Fig. 1, No. 6) is approximately 12 by 16 feet. It was perhaps 10 years old and had been burned when a fire swept through the area several years ago. Only low walls remained. The second was the Matoush early winter log cabin (Fig. 1, No. 7), inhabited from October 1953 until January 1954. The size is approximately 15 by 20 feet, and it had been occupied by 13 persons. No description of the construction or forms of log cabins in use among the Mistassini will be given here as this has been done elsewhere (Rogers, *The material culture of the Mistassini Indians*, MS.).

Two of the above lodge types can be dated and the period of their seasonal occupation documented. The earth-covered conical lodge (No. 1) was in use between 1915 and 1920 and the log cabin (No. 7) in 1953-54. Both were inhabited during the early winter period. Furthermore, it was stated that they would be occupied only once, rarely the next year, because the group does not return as a rule to the same area for approximately 10 years, since firewood and boughs would have been badly depleted. Another notable feature is their distance from the water in general contrast to camps established during the spring, summer, and fall. Informants stressed the fact that winter camps were placed well back from the shore to insure

protection from the cold winds that sweep down the lakes. In summer breezy spots are sought for the protection they give from mosquitoes and black flies. Another feature is their location on the west shore. The Indians stated that the west shore is usually chosen since here there is protection from the northwest winds that predominate in winter. It was said that if an east shore were chosen, the camp would have to be placed much farther back in the bush for adequate protection.

What conclusions can be drawn from the above about the other house features observed? Since they are all well back from the shore (Nos. 3 and 5 being exceptions) and since in most instances they are excavated, it can be assumed that they were occupied during the early winter period. Furthermore, since as a rule only one or two lodges are occupied simultaneously it can be further deducted that this area has been occupied five or more times. And since generally the same area was used at intervals of 10 years, more or less, the house remains noted at the Matoush's early winter camp of 1953 span 50 to 75 years. Certainly No. 3 appeared older than the remains of the earth-covered conical lodge (No. 1), and the same may apply for No. 4.

Two points of interest emerge from the above discussion. The first is the implication for the archaeologist. Here is a "site" spanning a time period of some 50 to 75 years and yet actually occupied for not more than 15 to 20 months in aggregate and by no more than 15 people at any one time, and at times undoubtedly less. Although no excavations were undertaken, there is no doubt that cultural remains would be minimal (*see*, Quimby 1962, pp. 217-239). Although no intensive survey was made of Lake Indicator, a number of spots were examined with negative results, except for one at the south end of the lake, where several chips and fire-cracked stones were discovered eroding out of a bank. This is in sharp contrast to the situation to the south near the mouth of the Temiscamie River, where numerous sites and artifacts exist (Rogers and Rogers, 1948, pp. 81-90; 1950, pp. 322-337). The implications seem clear. The Lake Indicator region, during the historic period at least, was inhabited primarily during the winter, with sites located well back from the shores and having few cultural remains.

The second point concerns the apparent changes that have occurred in lodge types during the past 50 to 75 years while this area has been inhabited. Formerly the lodges were excavated, although to no great depth, presumably for increased warmth. Furthermore, they tended in general to be oval in outline. It is suggested that they were all made with relatively small poles probably erected as in the earth-covered conical lodge. Stoves or fireplaces or both were used for heating. At a more recent date and extending into the present, the lodge floors were not excavated but merely levelled. The floor plan was rectangular and large logs were used in the construction of European-style cabins. Finally, stoves replaced fireplaces. The introduction of iron tools allowed this transformation to take place and in part the Indians' desire to emulate the Euro-Americans can be proposed as prompting the change. A further factor was the increasingly sedentary life led by the Mistassini as the tempo of the fur trade increased. The time

necessary to construct relatively substantial lodges, whether earth-covered conical lodges or log cabins, was available because increasing quantities of Euro-American foods made it unnecessary to be constantly on the move in search of food or else moving to a kill, and the trapping of fur-bearers necessitated a fairly lengthy residence in one area to exploit fully its resources.

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