



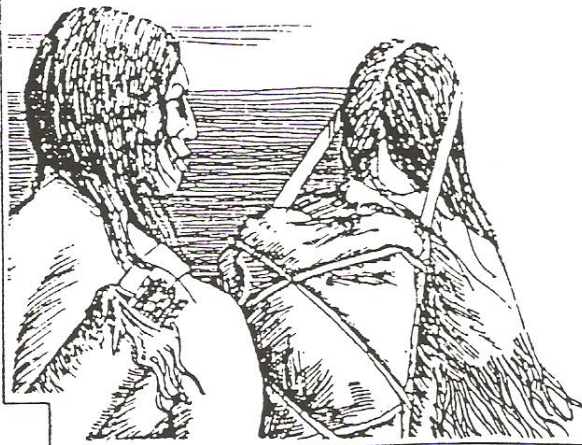
CHILCOTIN  
STUDIES:

CHILCOTIN  
INDIAN  
HOUSING;  
PART ONE.



BY: DAVE FALCONER.

1987.



# HOUSE-TYPES

# USED BY THE CHILCOTIN PEOPLE.

Apart from temporary shelters made from poles, woven grass-matting and brush, the Chilcotin people used two main types of houses, before the arrival of the whiteman ( and his steel tools ). These two types of houses were: <sup>1.</sup>

- A. An above-ground rectangular house with a gabled roof.  
( This house type was built two different ways ).
- B. A below-ground pit-house ( usually circular, but sometimes square or rectangular ).

The above-ground, rectangular, gabled-roof house was known as the *n(y)Λq?* ( or "stick-house" ) to the Chilcotin people of long ago. This type of house was usually built in a fairly flat place, with the dirt floor at ground level. Although the size of these houses varied, the most common size seems to have been about 6 metres (20 feet) long, by 4.5 metres (15 feet) wide. The top of the  $\wedge$ -shaped (gabled) roof was between 2.4 metres (8 ft.) and 3.6 metres (12 ft.) above the level of the dirt floor.

There were two main types of gabled-roof houses: the single ridge pole type, and the double ridge pole type. Possibly because it was easier to build, the single ridge pole type was the more common style in most parts of the Chilcotin territory.

A single ridge pole house had one vertical end-post dug into the ground at each end of the dirt floor. These two sturdy end-posts were V-notched (grooved) on top, in order to provide a resting place for the single ridge pole. The ridge pole was placed on top of, and between these end-posts (in a horizontal manner). Peeled rafter poles were placed with one end on the ground, and the other end resting on the ridge pole; along both sides of the ridge pole. After these rafter poles had been placed on both sides of the ridge pole, an upside-down V-shaped roof (known as a "gabled roof") had been framed up. (See sketch

1. See Bibliography for the main sources of recorded information on house types; at the end of this Chapter. More than any other single source, Robert Lane's 1953 Doctoral thesis has been relied upon for many of the details used in this chapter of Chilcotin Studies.

of the single ridge pole house). Peeled (and often split) poles were laid horizontally over the rafter poles, to make a covering along each side of the ridge pole. These horizontal poles reached up the rafter poles almost (but not quite) to the ridge pole. These poles were "chinked" with moss or dry grass. This "chinking" material was then covered with a layer of clay and sod; for insulation and water-proofing. An opening was left along each side of the ridge pole, to allow light to come in, and fire smoke to get out. This opening, which extended along the entire length of the roof was apparently left open all year around. The gable ends of the house were closed in with vertically-placed pieces of bark slabs, or with split poles. An opening at one end of the house served as a door. This door opening was covered with a piece of animal hide, or woven grass matting, during the colder months of the year.

A double ridge pole house usually had low side walls made by stacking 3 or 4 logs on top of each other. These horizontally stacked logs were kept in place (on top of each other), by pairs of short vertical posts pressing against both the inner and the outer surfaces of this low log wall. (See sketch of the double ridge pole house). These low log walls usually had a slightly inwards slant to them<sup>2</sup>. The topmost log (of each wall) was flattened on the upper surface to provide a base for the rafter poles. The rafter poles did not extend down to the ground, but rested against this flattened upper surface of the top log. This style of house, with its double (twin) ridge poles, had two vertical end-posts at each end of the dirt floor. These two end-posts at each end of the house were placed 60 to 90 centimetres (24-36 inches) away from each other. This meant that the two ridge poles, which were parallel to each other down the entire length of the house, were also 60 to 90 centimetres apart. Reaching between the top of each low side wall, and the ridge pole nearest to it, was a row of peeled (and often split) rafter poles. These two rows of rafter poles did not meet in the middle (at the top of the  $\wedge$ ), but left an opening between the two parallel ridge poles. This opening extended from one end of the house to the other. Like the opening along the top of the single ridge pole house, this opening also allowed light to come in, and fire smoke to get out. The roof of this style of house was also covered with a layer of clay and sod; for insulation and water-proofing. The gable ends of this style of house were similar to the gable ends of the single ridge pole house.

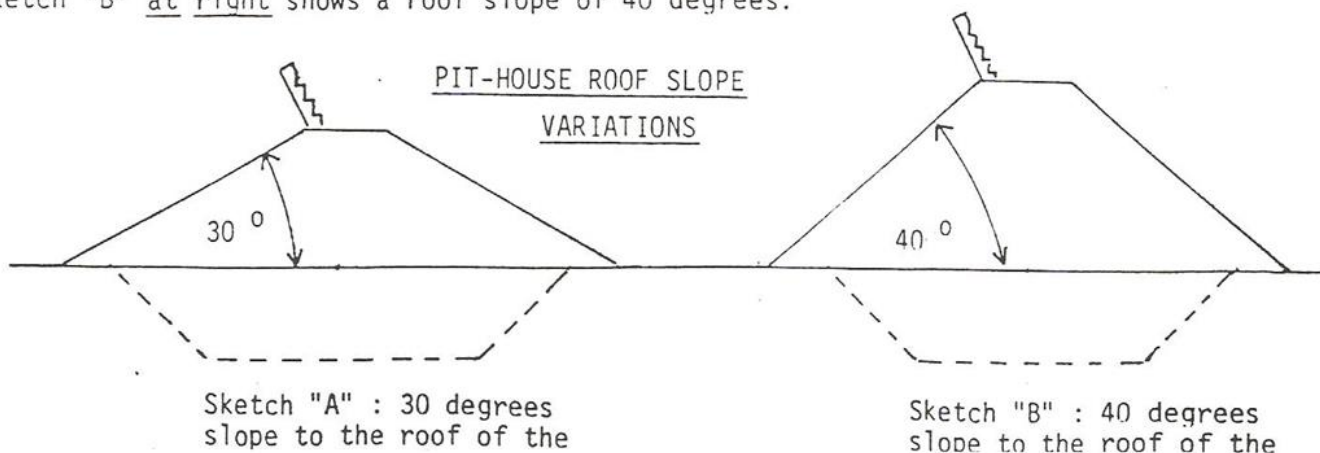
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2. This inward slant of the walls was likely designed to help offset the outward pressure on the top of the wall caused by the weight of the roof trying to push the bottom ends of the rafters outwards.

The gabled roof house, whether it had one ridge pole or two, was an effective and comfortable type of house. A fire was kept burning in a small hearth on the floor at the centre of the house (beneath the opening in the roof). Ventilation was such that the fire had ample draft to keep it burning briskly. This ventilation encouraged a relatively smoke-free fire, especially when dry wood was being burned. Moreover, this ventilation caused the fire to burn at a temperature that was hot enough to force the smoke directly upwards, and out the opening in the roof. Therefore, even though there was no stove, and certainly no stove-pipe, the inside of the house apparently remained fairly free of smoke. People slept along the sides of the floor area, under the cover of the roof sections above. With a floor area considerably larger than the average canvas camp-type wall tent of today, these gabled roof houses would have provided comfortable accommodation for a family.



The below-ground pit-houses built by the Chilcotin people were usually about 1.5 metres (5 ft.) deep; and between 3 and 7.5 metres (10-25 ft.) in diameter. The remains of larger, deeper pit-houses may be seen along the Chilco River and a few other locations; but these holes are not considered to be typical of Chilcotin pit-houses. According to Robert Lane, who gathered a lot of information on Chilcotin Indian house types in the early 1950's, Chilcotin pit-houses usually were circular in general shape. They usually had either 4 or 6 center posts. These center posts provided the inside structural support for the peeled log rafters, the peeled roofing poles, and the sod overlay. (The reason for peeling these poles and logs was not so much for appearance, but because a peeled pole or log will not rot as quickly as one with the bark left on). The roof of a typical Chilcotin pit-house had a slope of between 30 and 40 degrees. Below are two simple sketches. Sketch "A" at left shows a roof slope of 30 degrees. Sketch "B" at right shows a roof slope of 40 degrees.



At the top-centre of the pit-house roof was an opening. If the pit-house had been built with 4 center posts, the roof opening would be square in shape; but if the pit-house had been built with 6 center posts, the roof opening would be hexagonal in shape. This roof opening acted as both an entranceway ( down a notched log ladder ), and as a chimney-hole.

Unlike their Shuswap neighbours, the Chilcotin people did not accept or adopt the pit-house as a universally popular form of village housing. Although the pit-house was well insulated, and easy to keep warm in even the most severe winter weather, it did have several notable disadvantages. Firstly, because it had only one opening to the outside ( at the top ), it had very poor ventilation! This lack of ventilation caused two fairly serious problems to occur:

- A. Because the chimney was the only source of fresh air, the fire inside the pit-house had a very poor draft. This poor draft caused the fire to burn slowly, and produce quite a lot of smoke. Moreover, because the fire was burning slowly, there wasn't enough heat to force the smoke directly upwards and out the smoke hole. This meant that whenever a fire was burning inside the pit-house, the interior would be very smoky! (We do know that the Lillooet Indian people to the south only lit their pit-house fires once or twice a day, to avoid these smoky conditions. Perhaps the Chilcotin people only lit their pit-house fires once or twice a day also.)
- B. Due to the lack of ventilation, (and possibly due to the slow burning fires), the inside of the pit-house tended to become excessively damp and odorous. This was not only uncomfortable, but unhealthy as well. Older people who were bothered by arthritis often found this dampness unbearable, and moved out.

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There were other disadvantages related to pit-house living, as well. Since there was only the one small opening in the roof, the inside of the pit-house tended to be dark even in the middle of the day. This problem would be even worse in mid-winter, when the days were short. Another disadvantage was that whenever anyone climbed either in or out of the pit-house, bits of dirt and other debris would fall onto anything or anyone who was below. This meant that food had to be kept covered at all times. Carrying small children up and down the notched log ladder was an awkward task that had to be done constantly. ( Carrying anything in and out of the pit-house must've been difficult!). For these many reasons, it isn't surprising that the Chilcotin tended to prefer their gabled roof houses to the underground pit-house!

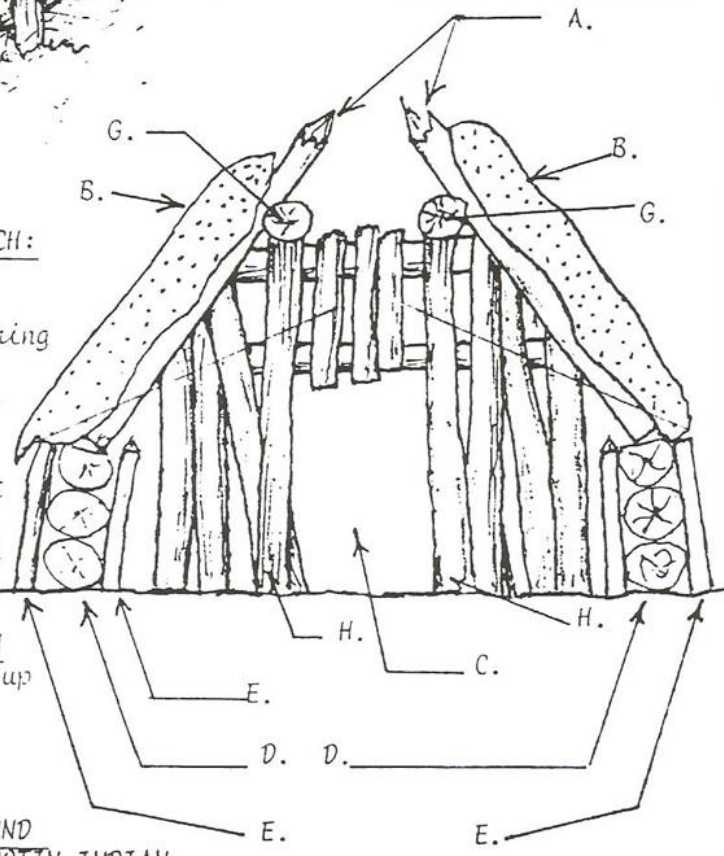
One type of (pre-white) Chilcotin Indian house, according to Robert B. Lane (1953). Sketch by D.G. Falconer.



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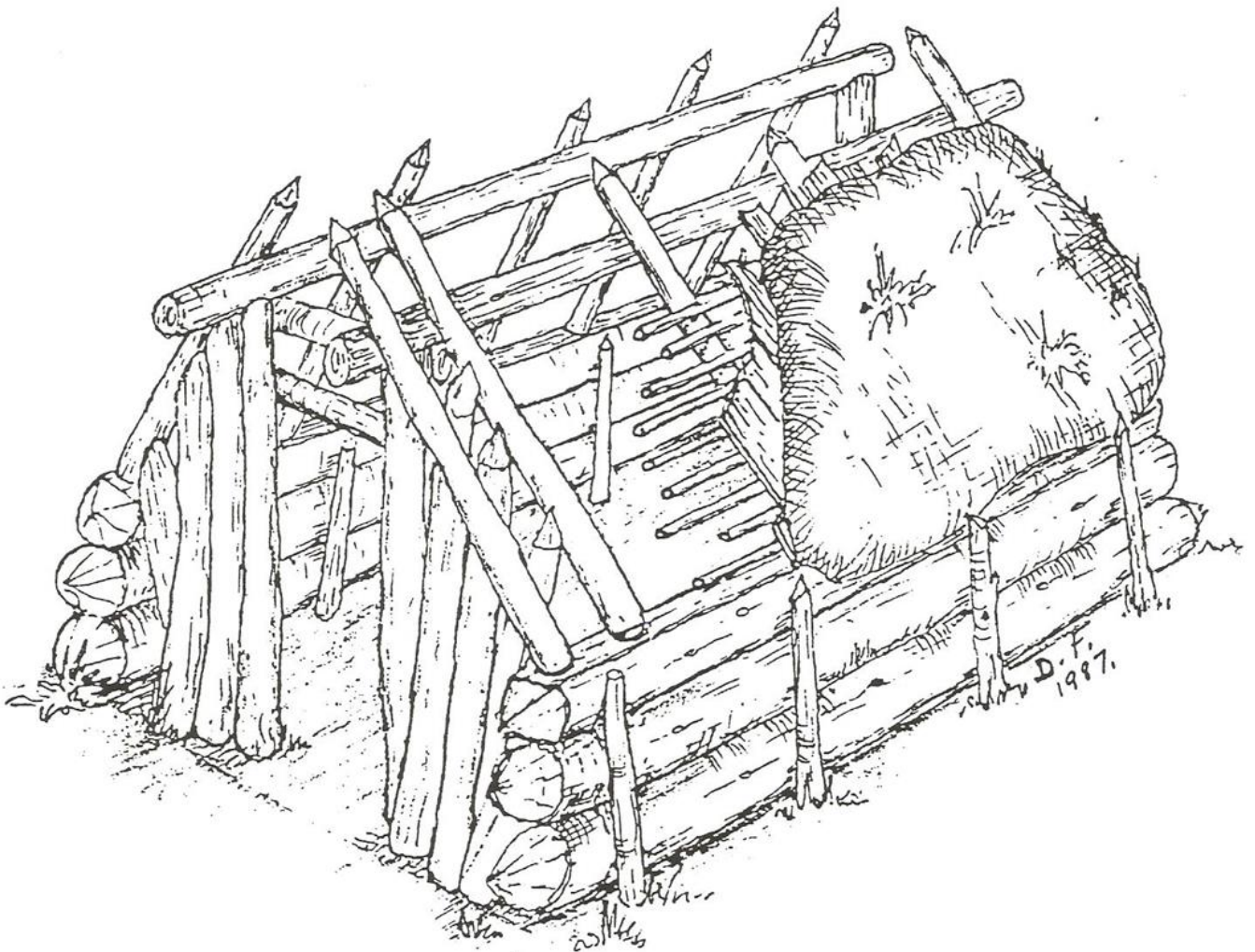
KEY TO CHILCOTIN HOUSE SKETCH:

- A..... Rafter poles.
- B..... Layer of bark and dirt covering the rafter poles.
- C..... House entrance (at one end).
- D..... Low log walls (along each side of the house).
- E..... Vertical cribbing poles that held the log walls in place.
- G..... Ridge poles that held up the rafter poles. This type of house had two ridge poles.
- H..... The 2 vertical posts at EACH end of the house, that held up the 2 ridge poles.



DOUBLE RIDGE POLE, ABOVE-GROUND HOUSE USED BY SOME OF THE CHILCOTIN INDIAN PEOPLE, before the coming of the whiteman.

*A. D. Gordon - It is probable that the pitch of the roof was not quite as steep as is*



Sketch of Chilkotin Indian Winter House.  
( Double ridge pole type )

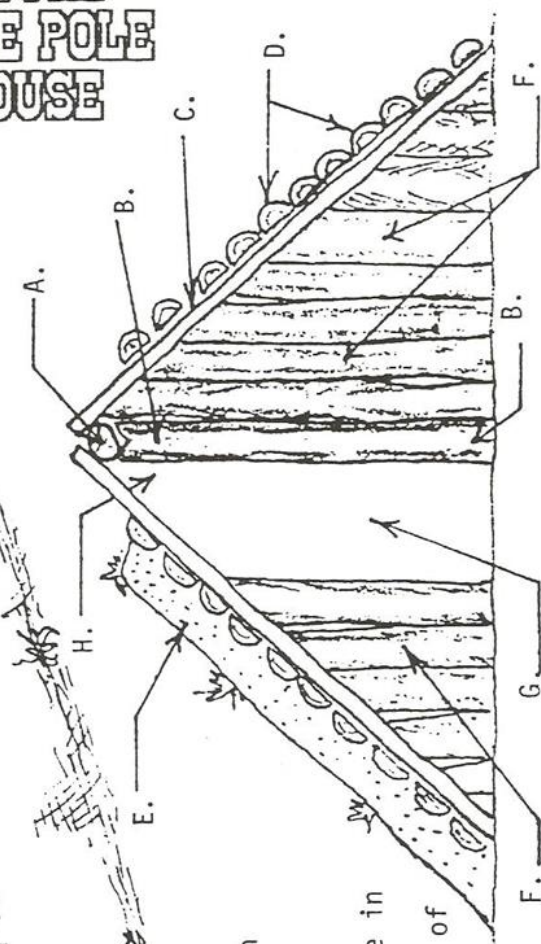
# ABOVE-GROUND SINGLE RIDGE POLE CABLED HOUSE

## KEY TO CHILCOTIN HOUSE SKETCH:

- A..... The ridge pole (which holds up the rafter poles).  
 B..... End-post (which holds up the ridge pole).

SINGLE RIDGE POLE, ABOVE-GROUND HOUSE COMMONLY USED BY THE CHILCOTIN PEOPLE, before the coming of the whiteman. (Based on a description by Robert B. Lane:1953).

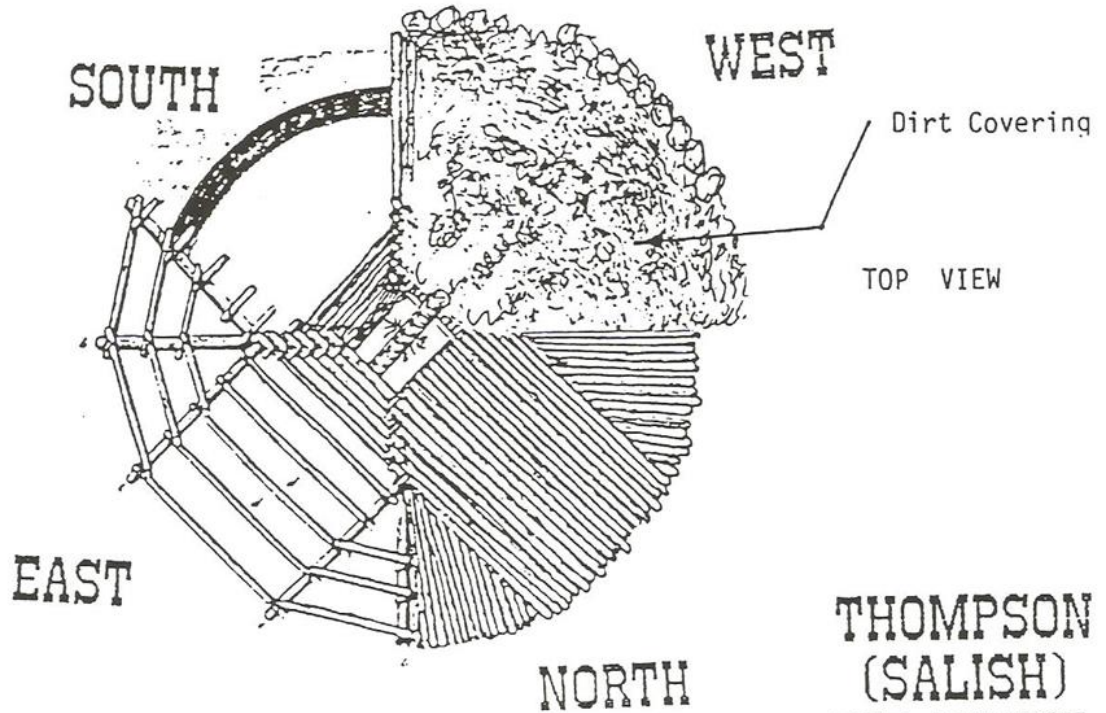
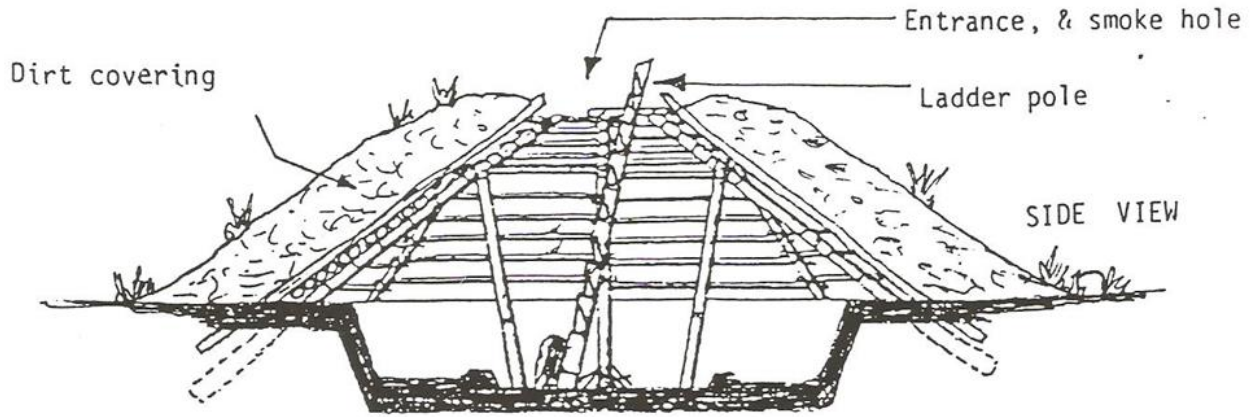
Sketch by D.G.Falconer.



- C..... Rafter poles (which are split in half, lengthwise).  
 D..... Horizontal poles used to cover the rafter poles. These poles were often split in half, lengthwise.  
 E..... Sod (dirt and grass roots) covering the sides of the house. (Clay was used as a base.)  
 F..... Vertical poles, or pieces of bark, which close in the ends of the house.  
 G..... Entrance (at one end only). Often had a piece of hide for a door.  
 H..... Smoke hole opening, along both sides of the ridge pole, from one end to the other.



# CHILCOTIN STUDIES



THOMPSON  
(SALISH)  
PIT-HOUSE,  
PERHAPS SIMILAR  
TO LOCAL  
PIT-HOUSES.

FROM: JAMES TEIT, "THE THOMPSON INDIANS...", 1900.

Whether it was a gabled roof house, or a pit-house, the general construction of a new house must have required a great amount of work and organization! It must be remembered that all the wood that went into these houses had to be cut and shaped with tools made from stone, bone or antler material. The cutting edges of these tools would lose their sharpness fairly quickly; and would then have to be re-worked or replaced. No steel nails or spikes were available, so all joints would have to be carefully fitted, or lashed together with raw-hide. Split poles would have to be slowly split with wedges made of fire-hardened wood, or stone, or bone, or antler material. All this work must've taken many, many hours, and the co-operation of many, many people. Simply digging a pit large enough for a pit-house, must've been a slow, difficult task, without the use of steel shovels. Root-digging sticks and woven baskets may have been the only "tools" available for these excavation jobs. Here again, many hours of work would've been needed! Since much of the wood in these houses either touched the ground, or was covered with dirt (or clay), wood rot must have occurred relatively quickly. Therefore, houses would have to be re-built, or completely replaced, every few years.

From everything that is known about early Chilcotin Indian house styles, it is believed that the gabled roof houses were much more popular than the pit-house. However, most Chilcotin Indian villages of long ago probably had a few pit-houses, a few double ridge pole houses, and quite a few single ridge pole houses.

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According to Robert Lane (1953: page 47), the Chilcotin people chose their village locations:

...with a view to concealment from enemies, a supply of firewood, and conveniently located fisheries or hunting grounds. Usually they were near lakes, but not actually on the shores. They were set back in the woods where they would be less conspicuous.

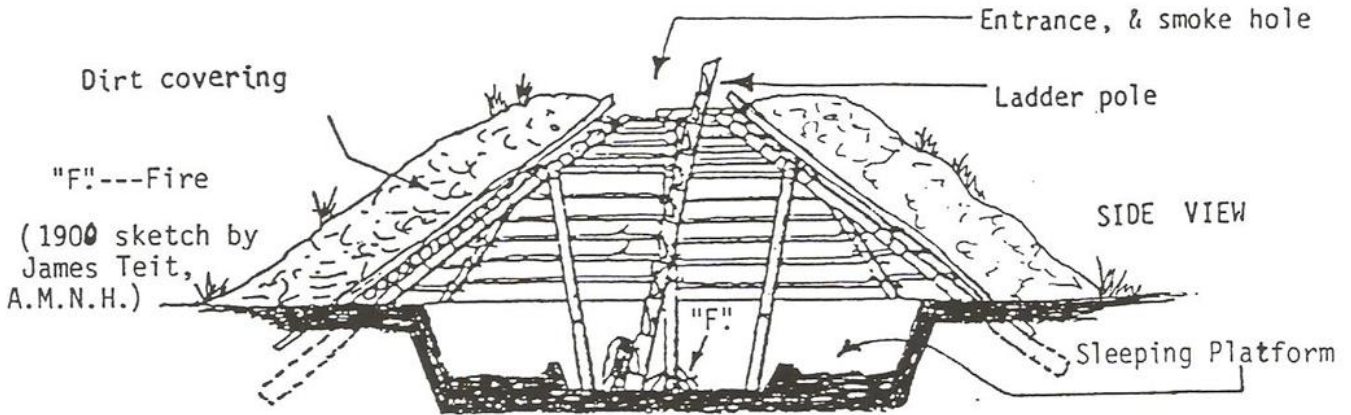
Having a good supply of dry firewood to burn in their houses was always a concern to the Chilcotin people. With several houses in a village needing a steady supply of dry firewood, throughout the winter, it became harder and harder to find such wood, without having to carry it great distances. For this reason alone, it sometimes became necessary to change the location of a camp or village every few years!



# UNDERGROUND (PIT) HOUSES.

THIS DATA COLLECTED BY RANDY BOUCHARD & D.I.KENNEDY OF THE  
 B.C.INDIAN LANGUAGE PROJECT; FROM THE INTERIOR SALISH  
 LILLOOET REGION OF B.C., BETWEEN 1968 AND 1973.

In the old days, the people had to work together to be able to build an underground house. Only those people who helped build it would be allowed to live in it. Those people who would not work together with the others would have no choice but to spend the winter in shelters which had been constructed as summer lodges.



Inside the pit which had been dug they constructed a platform about 1 foot [0.3 metre] high, completely around the house, 5 feet [1.5 metres] in from the edges of the pit.

It was on this platform that the people slept, using boughs and pounded inner cedar bark as mattresses. Hides from mountain goats and other animals were used as blankets. Sometimes it was so crowded that the people had to sleep with their heads at the sides of the pit and only the width of the platform in which to stretch out. The special hunters, shared their surplus animal hides with the other people.

A cedar log served as a ladder leading from the floor of the pit up through the smoke-hole. Notches (used as steps) were burned into the log with hot rocks.

Cat-tail plant leaves were woven into mats by the women; they also made eating mats from inner cedar bark, but wooden bowls were used most often to eat from. Community work was extremely important, for if someone didn't help, he was excluded in the winter. There were often 20 or 30 people living in one underground house.

A fire for cooking was made for an hour in the morning and an hour at night. The women placed hot rocks in water contained in water-tight baskets to cook each family's meal. Although only two cooking fires were made each day, the underground house was always warm.

The people moved into these underground houses in the late fall, and stayed until the leaves came out on the trees. Then they built plank houses. Four posts were sunk into the ground and cedar planks, which were about 2 feet [0.6 metre] wide and 4 inches [10 centimetres] thick, were fastened between them. When the people went up into the mountains they would live in a rock crevice or in a lean-to. There was always a lot of building material to be found along the banks of the rivers.

Told by Sam Mitchell

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# UNDERGROUND (PIT) HOUSES.

LIFE IN THESE LILLOOET PIT-HOUSES MAY HAVE BEEN QUITE SIMILAR TO  
 LIFE IN A PIT-HOUSE IN THE CHILCOTIN COUNTRY. THE LILLOOET  
 PEOPLE LIVED IMMEDIATELY TO THE SOUTH OF THE CHILCOTIN COUNTRY