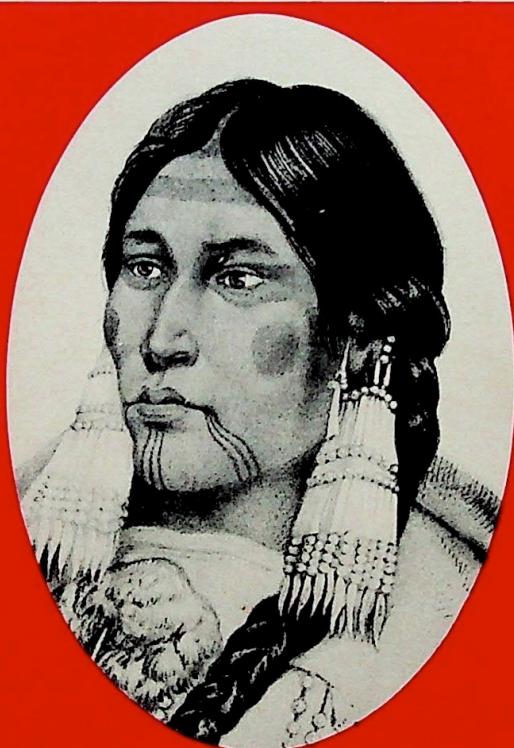


# TATTOOING PRACTICES OF THE CREE INDIANS



by  
**D. W. Light**



GLENBOW·ALBERTA INSTITUTE  
CALGARY, ALBERTA  
OCCASIONAL PAPER No.6

**FRONT COVER:**

"Woman of the Cree tribe" is the title of this engraving based upon a painting by Karl Bodmer in 1833. The woman, the wife of a French Canadian hunter at Fort Union on the Missouri River, has tattoo marks extending from her mouth. The engraving is from Prince Maximilian's "Travels".

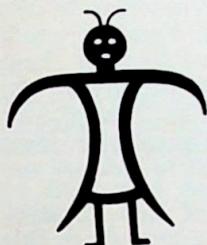
# TATTOOING PRACTICES OF THE CREE INDIANS

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**W.**  
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1972



This carved effigy of an Ojibwa woman shows four tattoo marks incised below the mouth. The old carving is a Midewiwin ceremonial object from Manitoba. (Glenbow No. AP-1150)



Thunderbird Tattoo\*  
Plains Cree

One of the most common methods employed by the Indians of North America to adorn themselves was tattooing. This permanent marking was produced by introducing a coloring agent under the skin. Indians usually accomplished this by pricking the skin with sharp objects or by cutting and then inserting the color.

This practice, along with face and body painting, ear pendants, nose rings, labrets, scarification and head flattening, enhanced the individual's personal beauty and also often was considered an aid when communicating with spirit helpers.

Among Indian males, tattooing enabled the wearer to be clearly recognized as a person who had received special powers from a spirit helper, was brave and influential and was one who could endure this painful operation. Although these markings had a religious connotation among adult males, most females decorated themselves purely for ornamentation.

Many early explorers and travellers reported tattooing to have been common in most areas of North America prior to the breakdown of original native cultures. With the advent of the traders and missionaries, tattooing and many other native practices soon died out. Only the "stubborn and backward", as judged by both white and Indian, retained this older custom.

This paper deals with tattooing practices among the Cree, with particular emphasis upon the Plains divisions. It also contains comparative data from the Ojibwa and Assiniboine with whom the Crees camped and hunted. These tribes often adopted each other's customs to a point where it became difficult to distinguish one from another.

For example, Alexander Henry the Elder, when describing an Assiniboine village near the present Saskatchewan-Manitoba border in 1776, observed: "In their religious notions, as well as in their dress, arms and other particulars, there is a general agreement between the Osinipoilles and the Cristinaux [Cree]" (Henry 1901: 305). Referring again to the Assiniboine in the 1790's, Tanner stated: "So many Ojibbeways and Crees live among them that they are most commonly able to understand something of the Ojibbeway

\*The small figures on this and succeeding pages are men's tattooed body designs, as drawn for the author by various native informants as indicated on page 23.

language . . ." (Tanner 1956:132). Daniel Harmon, during his stay at Fort Alexandria, traded with both the Cree and Assiniboine and remarked, "As both Tribes often meet their customs and manners are nearly the same, however there is no resemblance in their Dialects" (Harmon 1904:276).

Further to the west, while trading at Fort Vermilion in the present east-central Alberta, Alexander Henry the Younger wrote that the Cree were dispersed over a vast extent of territory "and often mix with Assiniboines and other natives with whom they are at peace" (Coues 1897:516). He further noted of the Assiniboine that "Their dress, tents, customs, and manners are nearly the same as those of the Crees . . ." (Coues 1897:517).

Even today in the Battleford Agency, people of Red Pheasant Reserve (originally Cree-Saulteaux and half-breed) live along side of and for years have intermarried with the Assiniboine bands of Mosquito, Lean Man and Grizzly Bear's Head. The present White Bear Reserve at Moose Mountain, Saskatchewan, was originally settled by three bands, White Bear's Saulteaux, Pheasant Rump's and The Ocean Man's Assiniboines. The reserves along the Qu'Appelle River and the Touchwood Hills area in Saskatchewan were also a mixture of three groups, the Assiniboine being most prominent in the Piapot and Kakeewistahaw bands. In the 1870's, Isaac Cowie mentioned a mixed group of "semi-Stony and Cree 'Young Dogs' of Qu'Appelle and Touchwood Hills" (Cowie 1913:308).

### TYPES OF TATTOOS

Among these various bands of Cree, Assiniboine and Ojibwa, the earliest known reference to tattooing was made by Alexander Henry the Elder. In describing the customs and clothing of the Swampy Cree near Lake Manitoba during the 1760-76 period, he states: "The women, like the men, paint their faces with red ochre; and in addition usually tatoo [sic] two lines, reaching from the lip to the chin, or from the corners of the mouth to the ears. They omit nothing to make themselves lovely." (Henry 1901:248) Strangely enough, Henry and several other early explorers make little mention of tattooed males. It may be that they showed considerably more interest in the fairer sex than in the appearance of the men.

Henry's description of the women, however, is fully supported and expanded by later travellers and explorers. Dr. John Richardson, who accompanied John Franklin, observed tattooing among the Swampy Cree Indians near Cumberland House in 1821. He noted the practice was "almost universal among the Crees" and that the women "are in general content with having one or two lines drawn from the corners of the mouth towards the angles of the lower jaw" (Franklin 1823:71).

An American fur trader, Edwin Thompson Denig, wrote a more detailed description of tattooing among the five tribes that

Le Sonnant, or Mahsette-kuiab, a Cree chief, shows extensive tattooing on the chest and shoulders. He was sketched at Fort Union by artist Karl Bodmer in 1833.



he knew well, Sioux, Arikara, Assiniboine, Cree and Crow. He described the practice among the women as follows: "It is usually done on females at the age of 12 to 14 years, is only exhibited on them in the form of a round spot in the middle of the forehead, stripes from the corners and middle of the mouth down to the chin, occasionally transversely over the cheek, and rings around the wrist and upper part of the arms" (Denig 1930:592).

Alanson Skinner probably was the first anthropologist to describe tattooing among the eastern Cree and Saulteaux. He learned of it during the summers of 1908 and 1909 while studying the Indians living east of York Factory and Norway House. He commented that tattooing had been common "but has long since become obsolete. The only design now remembered is a simple band about the wrists" (Skinner 1911:23). In a further paper on the Saulteaux he stated he had seen an old tattooed woman at Fort Hope. She had "a simple bilaterally symmetrical cross tattooed on each cheek as a charm against toothache and headache." He also learned that "similar symbols were placed on the legs and wrists to ward off rheumatism" (Skinner 1911:124). Although he presented no evidence, he speculated that the design may have originated with Roman Catholic missionaries, rather than having been an aboriginal idea.

In my own field work, I have collected numerous women's necklaces which incorporate the use of a bilaterally symmetrical cross. Each owner had stated that it was an old Indian religious



Tattoo marks around the mouth are clearly evident in this sketch of an Ojibwa woman by Friederich Kurz in 1851.

symbol, although each of the bands from whom the necklaces originated has had a long association with missionaries and are subject to strong influence from French half-breeds as well.

"Women's tattoos", said informant Solomon Bluehorn, "generally speaking, were not of religious designs but were for decoration or protection from sickness. Lines from the lip to the chin were the most common and had no special significance other than enhancing the beauty of the wearer. Women might have small circles on each temple to ward off severe headaches which, if not checked, might cause them to become *Weetigos*, or cannibal spirits. Marks also were applied to the wrists and fingers to ward off rheumatism. These were small circles or dots.

"The only religious designs that might be seen were among a few old women who were proficient with medicines and had received supernatural help during a Thirst Dance. They sometimes had Thunderbirds tattooed on their cheeks." (Personal interview).

Richardson, probably dealing with female tattooing, indicated that "The lines on the face are formed by dexterously running an awl under the cuticle, and then drawing a cord, dipped in charcoal and water, through the canal thus formed" (Franklin 1823:71). Skinner recorded a similar process among the Saulteaux. It was performed "by charring birchbark or wood and rubbing it on a thread which was fastened to a needle and the design sewed under the skin, the pigment making it permanent." (Skinner 1911:124).

Men seldom had their faces tattooed, but marks and designs on the upper body were common. Andrew Graham, when describing Crees trading on Hudson Bay in the period 1767-91, observed that the men's "breasts, backs, hands, arms and faces are marked with a variety of figures, some resembling birds, others beasts, and fishes; while others have borders, flourishes or plain lines according to their fancies" (Williams 1969:144). Richardson in 1821 noted that "some of the men have their bodies covered with a great variety of lines and figures. It seems to be considered by most rather as a proof

of courage than an ornament." (Franklin 1823:71).

In 1858, Henry Youle Hind gave a vivid account of the *Mistick-oos* band of Plains Cree who were camped near the elbow of the South Saskatchewan, and noted that "Ornamenting the skin of the arms and breast with figures of birds, quadrupeds or symbols of different kinds, is common among the Plains Cree" (Hind 1860: II, 137).

An informant told Edward S. Curtis, who undertook field work among the Woods Cree of Alberta in 1927, that in his youth he saw "numerous men with chests tattooed in the same design, a pair of vertical lines on each half of the thorax, with sloping cross-lines. This was a good-luck symbol. A certain man had on each side of his chest a tattooed hand, in commemoration of a fight with the Blackfeet, in which an enemy actually laid hold of him but nevertheless was killed. Some men had themselves ornamented with figures representing their dream-animals" (Curtis 1928:XVIII:65).

David G. Mandelbaum, whose field work in 1934 for the American Museum of Natural History has provided a most thorough description of the Plains Cree, stated: "Men might have their arms and chests marked . . . A common tattoo pattern for men consisted of two parallel lines extending from the under side of the chin to the middle of the chest at a level with the nipples. Two other parallel lines extended from points below the nipples to the level of the navel. The arms were marked by a series of horizontal lines." (Mandelbaum 1940:209).

My own Cree informant, Solomon Bluehorn, emphatically stated that these tattoos on men were always of religious significance,

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The Cree woman at right has tattoo marks below her mouth. Sketched by Friederich Kurz in 1851. At centre is a woman from the Mandan tribe.



Artist Friederich Kurz sketched this tattooed Cree woman at Fort Berthold in 1851. Lines at the cheeks and around the eyes indicate face paint.



never for ornamentation. Most commonly used designs were straight lines, buffalo heads, the spirit known as the "Buffalo that Walks like a Man", thunderbirds, Skeleton Men (*pakakoos*), bears, suns, stars and horse tracks. The designs were referred to in Cree as *ah-sas-soot*, and the practice of tattooing as *ah-sas-soo-wayo*.\*

#### METHODS OF TATTOOING

"When a person was sick or had received a favor from a spirit helper," stated Bluehorn, "he might go to a tattooing bundle owner and ask to be tattooed. Sometimes he had received his instructions in a dream and had been told what designs should be tattooed." (Personal interview). Richardson noted that "It seems to be considered by most rather as a proof of courage than an ornament" (Franklin 1823:71) while Denig said it was "a mark of rank in the men, distinguishing the warrior when elaborately executed and, as the operation is one requiring the pay of one or two horses, it proves the person's parents to have been sufficiently rich to afford that mark of distinction imprinted on their children." He added that "Men are tattooed entirely after having struck their first enemy" (Denig 1930:592). Four Clouds, a Plains Cree informant, said that some were tattooed "because they dreamed they should be, others because their wives urged them to do so and show their bravery." (Skinner 1914:76).

While there are some variations in descriptions of the tattooing ritual, due perhaps to different time periods, tribal variations and interpretations of the observers, all are fairly consistent.

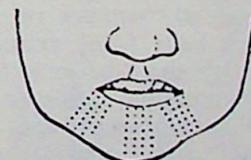
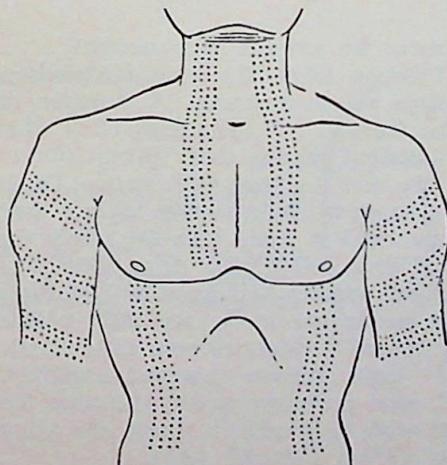
\*Numerous other references to the existence of tattooing among these tribes may be found in Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence through The Continent of America in 1789 and 1793*, London, 1801, p. CXX; *Earl of Southesk, Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains*, Edmonton, 1969, p. 262; John McDougall, *Pathfinding on Plain and Prairie*, Toronto, 1898, p. 74; and John Maclean, *Canadian Savage Folk*, Toronto, 1896, p. 67.

Fine Day, a Plains Cree informant, said the ritual was performed by "A man who has a dream which gives him the power to do tattooing, although he may delegate the actual operation to someone who knows how to do it well" (Mandelbaum 1940:210).

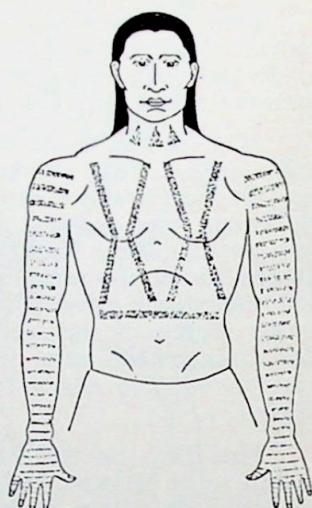
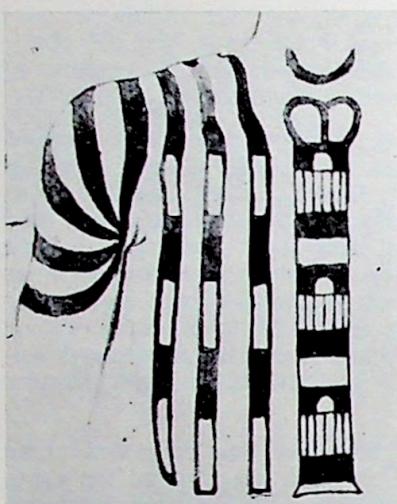
"On the day of the event," said Bluehorn, "food was prepared and a special lodge was built. It was a double lodge similar to that used in the *Pakakoos* or Give-away Dance. As with most religious gatherings, men brought their bundles or sacred objects, and food was prepared for a feast." (Personal interview). According to Four Clouds, the person wanting to be tattooed went to the bundle owner and offered him tobacco. "He receives it, and in return sings a song asking mercy of the spirit powers and help from doing wrong. The dreamer then burns the tobacco and points his pipestem downward toward the region from which the powers spring." (Skinner 1914:77).

Fine Day, on the other hand, indicated that boys had to be coaxed to be tattooed and that "an old man goes around the camp and calls out, 'Come early in the morning. When you are tattooed, you will be all dressed up. At a dance all you will have to do is take off your robe.'" (Mandelbaum 1940:210). When they had arrived, according to Fine Day, the boys were fed "to fill out their skins" (Mandelbaum 1940:210). Denig adds that "When all are assembled, the feast is eaten with much solemnity and invocations to the supernatural power" (Denig 1930:592).

"A circle dance would begin, with the beat provided by four drummers who also sang," said Bluehorn. "Men would dance around, holding their sacred items in their hands before them. The subject then stripped and lay on his back, and the shaman drew the design he intended to tattoo." (Personal interview). John Long, a free trader who witnessed the ceremony among the Chippewa on the Nipigon River in 1777, stated the shaman used "a pointed stick dipped in water in which gunpowder has been dissolved" (Long



Anthropologist David Mandelbaum obtained this sketch of a typical tattooing design used on a Cree man (at left), and on a woman (above).



At left is a tattooed body design, painted by Friederich Kurz in 1851, while at right is a sketch of Plains Cree tattooing made by native artist S. Ichikawa.

1904:85), while Fine Day described it as a mixture of charcoal paste and Denig simply as "an outline with ink" (Denig 1930:592). The Four Sky Thunder tattooing bundle contained charcoal of red willow and a seven inch willow stick to apply the coloring.

The instrument used for tattooing consisted of a series of sharp points, which may have varied from bundle to bundle. The one contained in the Four Sky Thunder bundle consists of a willow stick 8 3/8 inches long, with split owl feathers at the top end. Below this are two large hollow bird quills with pellets inside which rattle when the instrument is used. Two large brass hawk bells are attached just below the feathers. The base is lead wrapped with eight steel needles projecting from the end.

Long described the instrument he saw as "ten needles . . . fixed in a small wooden frame" (Long 1904:85) while Richardson spoke of "needles of various sizes set in a frame. A number of hawk bells [are] attached to this frame . . ." (Franklin 1823:71). Denig's description is the most detailed, stating that "From four to six porcupine quills or needles are tied together with sinew. These are enveloped in split feathers; wrapped with sinew, until a stiff pencil about the size of a goose quill is had, with the quills or needles projecting at the end" (Denig 1930:592). Fine Day described "an instrument made of four needles tied together. Feathers are attached to the handle and inside the quills are little pellets which rattle when the instrument is used." (Mandelbaum 1940:210). Four Clouds speaks simply of "eight needles fastened together" (Skinner 1914:77), while Hind, who probably never witnessed the ritual, believed it was performed with "a needle, a thorn, the point of a knife, or the edge of a flint" (Hind 1860:II, 137).

When the tattooing was ready to begin, the shaman began to pray. "He asks that the boys may wear the tattooing to old age," stated Fine Day. "Then he begins to sing and as he does, the operator brings his needles down with short, rapid strokes." (Mandelbaum 1940:210). "Where the bolder outlines occur," adds Long, "he incises the flesh with a gun flint" (Long 1904:85). The shaman's song begins "*Musinuwhage ye eh . . .*" (Skinner 1914:77) and continues until the ritual is finished.

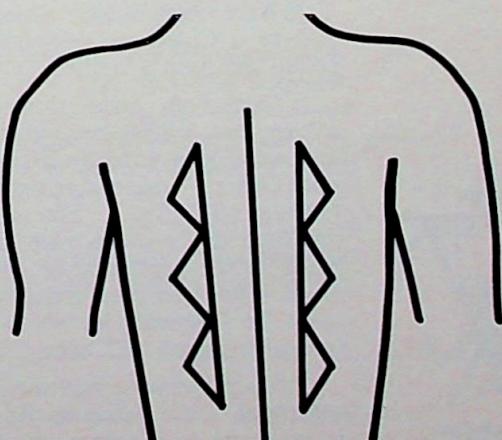
Once the skin has been punctured, the coloring matter is introduced. Long described it as vermillion, with vacant spaces being rubbed with gunpowder to produce a variety of red and blue. This is the only account I have read which states that a red coloring agent was used. Richardson described it as "an indelible stain of finely powdered willow-charcoal," (Franklin 1823:71), Denig as "Red willow and cedar wood . . . burned to charcoal, pulverized, and mixed with a little water. This is the blue coloring matter." (Denig 1930:592) and Curtis as "moistened gunpowder" (Curtis 1928:XVIII:65).

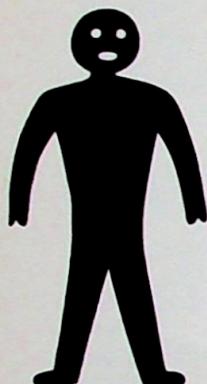
The needles were dipped in this coloring matter as the work progressed (Long 1904:35). The skin "is punctured with the instrument above alluded to so as to draw blood, filling up the punctures with the coloring matter as he goes along by dipping the needles therein and applying them" (Denig 1930:592).

The shaman then "takes an old piece of hide that has been thoroughly smoked and blots the blood" (Mandelbaum 1940:210). Such a hide in the Four Sky Thunder bundle is actually a face mask made of tanned buffalo hide. It has two holes for the eyes and a large mouth opening."

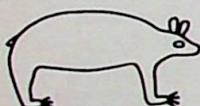
The actual process of tattooing was very painful but the patient would not cry out because of fear of ridicule by the large

This tattooed body design, used by a man named Everlasting Star, was drawn by Mrs. William Whitehat of the Sakimay Reserve. Everlasting Star died about 1940.

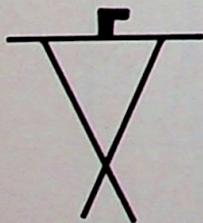




Buffalo that Walks  
Like a Man  
Plains Cree



Grizzly Bear  
Plains Cree



Thunderbird  
Plains Cree

numbers of people present. Many could not control the tears which ran down their faces but the continual drumming and singing often drowned out their groans. Long observed that "the war songs are sung, accompanied by a rattle being round the hawk bells, called Chessaquot, which is kept shaking to stifle the groans such pains must naturally occasion" (Long 1904:85). Four Clouds said the neck was the most painful place to tattoo and that "The patient writhed under the torture, and some young men fainted or cried out that they could not stand it" (Skinner 1914:77).

The extent of the pain was indicated by Richardson who said that "A half-breed, whose arm I amputated, declared that tattooing was not only the more painful operation of the two, but rendered infinitely more difficult to bear by its tediousness, having lasted in his case, for three days" (Franklin 1823:71).

When it was obvious that a youth was about to succumb, his sweetheart would be called to sit beside him "and so shame him into bearing the pain bravely before her" (Skinner 1914:77). In addition, the boy might be given some maple sugar to eat (Mandelbaum 1940:210).

Each morning during the Chippewa ritual the affected area was washed with cold water mixed with a herb called *Pockqueesegan* and at the end, "the wounds are then seared with punk wood to prevent them from festering" (Long 1904:85). Among the Cree, the "medicine to allay the inflammation was put on like a poultice and held down by a cover made from the hard smoked part of the skin tipi" (Skinner 1914:77).

The ritual which Long witnessed in 1777 was part of a Chippewa adoption ceremony and ended by giving the man a name.

Observers agree that the tattooing process was a long one, taking two or three days. "The drumming and singing is kept up all the time of the operation," said Denig, "with occasional stops to smoke and eat" (Denig 1930:592). The cost was generally a horse for each day's work, with the first presentation being made at the beginning of the ritual. Four Clouds indicated a fee was paid unless the man "dreamed that he must be tattooed, in which case the work was done free of charge" (Skinner 1914:77).

"Not everyone had the right to perform the tattooing ritual," said Solomon Bluehorn, "for the power had to be given in a dream. Such a shaman would become

the owner of a tattooing bundle, containing the articles needed for the ceremony," (Personal interview).

Bluehorn told the following story of the tattooing bundle's creation.

Long ago, in the buffalo days, a man had a dream. A buffalo spirit came to him and said, "My Grandson, I am the most powerful spirit of the Plains Cree. If you follow my instructions I will give you a great gift; it is a tattooing bundle."

This spirit was called the "Buffalo that Walks like a Man" and under his instructions the man made the bundle. When the spirit gave this gift, he also taught the first owner the proper tattooing procedures, songs and prayers. Because of this gift, the man was considered to be one of the most influential medicine men of the Cree.

As in the case of other religious bundles, the tattooing bundle was hung outside on a tripod during the day. At sunset or an approaching storm, it was taken into the tipi or dwelling. It was accorded all the respect of other such sacred belongings.

Like other bundles, it was wrapped in stroud cloth, which the Cree referred to as *munto-ee-gun* (sacred cloth), the two popular colors being *mee-kway-ah-gun* (red cloth) and *kus-kee-tay-wee-gun* (black cloth) or navy blue. Whenever the bundle was opened or actually used, a cloth offering was added to the outer wrappings. Tobacco was left inside the bundle for the use of spirits. Sweet grass was always burned to enable the prayers and songs to be carried aloft to where the spirit would be watching. Over a number of years, when some of the wrappings became tattered, they were "put away" in the bush with tobacco, as an offering to the spirit giver.

Religious items such as this bundle were all referred to by the general Cree term *wus-kwe-pah-toe-gun*, or "kept in a clean place".

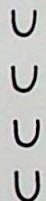
#### CONTENTS OF FOUR SKY THUNDER BUNDLE

The bundle, which is in the author's possession, is wrapped in red stroud cloth and measures approximately 24 inches in length and 4 inches in diameter when tied up. When unfolded, the stroud covering measures 24 by 32 inches in size. Inside the outer wrapping are the following items:

- A piece of braided sweet grass thirteen inches long, which was burned as incense whenever the bundle was opened in order to carry the prayers to the spirits.
- One mussel shell used as a dish in which to mix the charcoal and water paste.
- A cloth rag tied with a thong and containing powdered charcoal of red willow.



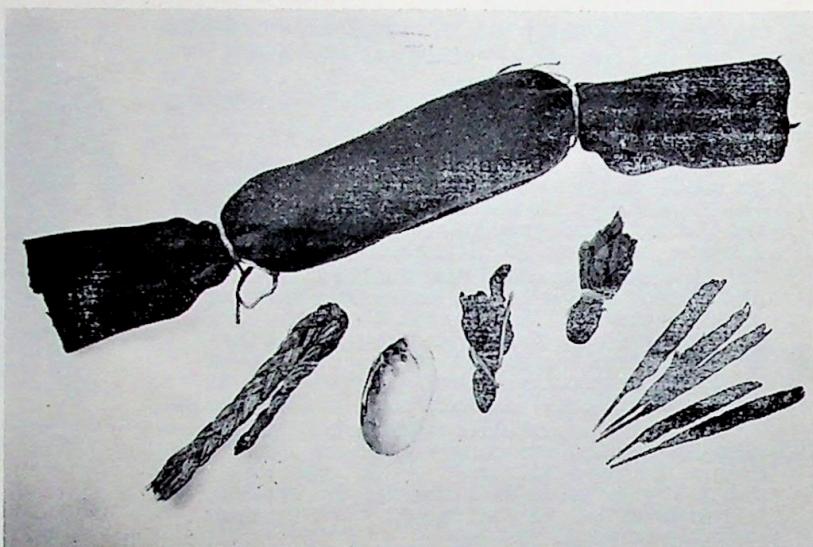
Skeleton Man  
Woods Cree  
& Ojibwa



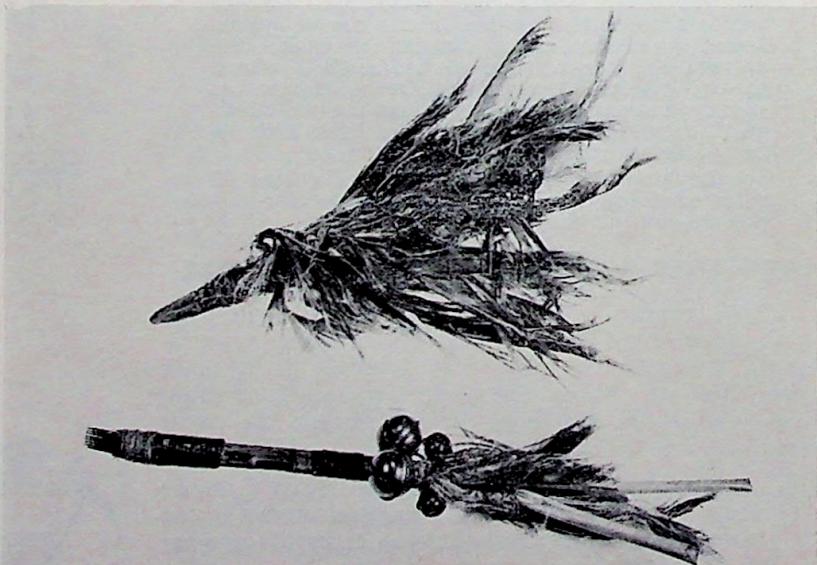
Horse Tracks  
Plains Cree



Thunderbird  
Plains Cree

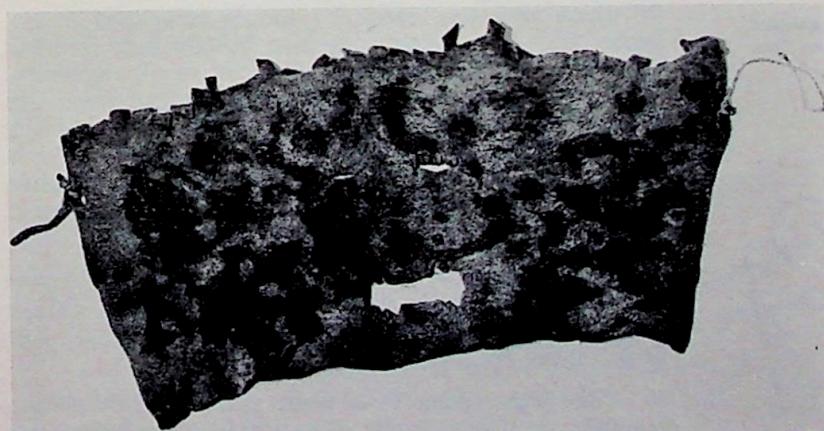


Contents of a Cree tattooing bundle. At top is the inner bundle containing face mask and weasel skin pouch. Below it, left to right, are braided sweet-grass, mussel shell dish, bags of powdered charcoal, and feathers worn by the ceremonialist.

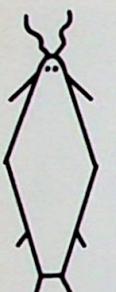
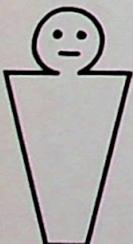


Two important instruments in the tattooing bundle are the decorated stick, above, which was used to outline the proposed design with charcoal paste and to force the color into the holes made by the tattooing needles. The other instrument, below, contains eight steel needles which were used for the tattooing process.

This neck pouch from the tattooing bundle is made of two summer weasel skins and a bag bearing a white buffalo head on a blue background. It contains the black feathers worn by the ceremonialist.



Inside of buffalo hide mask, showing blotches of dried blood. This was worn by the tattooer during the ritual.

Otter  
Cree & OjibwaThunderbird  
Plains CreeManito  
Plains Cree

- (d) A black cloth rag tied and containing same as above.
- (e) A willow stick seven inches long and 3/8 inch diameter, shaved to a flattened surface on the lower end. Most of the stick is covered with split owl and down feathers tied with sinew. Five brass hawk bells are attached to the upper end. Bluehorn has stated that this instrument was used to outline the proposed design with the charcoal paste. After the skin was punctured, the flat surface was used to force the coloring agent into the holes made by the needles.
- (f) The tattooing instrument, consisting of a willow 8 3/8 inches long, slightly elliptical, with the widest section measuring 7/16 of an inch. The top end is covered with split owl feathers and down attached with sinew. Beneath the feathers are two large hollow bird quills with pellets inside which rattle when the instrument is used. Two large and two ordinary brass hawk bells are attached just below the feathers. The base is lead wrapped with eight steel needles projecting half an inch from the wooden stick end. The needles are imbedded in the stick and further reinforced with sinew binding which also secures the lead to the stick.
- (g) A smaller red stroud bundle tied and wrapped in a manner similar to the whole bundle. The red stroud measures 24 by 15 inches and, when rolled, it is tied near each end with leather thongs.

This inner bundle contains two items, the first of which is a face mask 17 inches wide and 8 1/2 inches high. It is made of tanned buffalo hide and has two holes for the eyes and a large mouth aperture. Each opening is ringed with red ochre and there are two additional smudges near the horns. "This mask represents the face of the Buffalo that Walks like a Man", stated Bluehorn. Two leather laces are attached to each side to tie the mask to the head of the bundle owner when the actual tattooing takes place.

The reverse of the mask has many dark blotches of dried blood. After puncturing the skin, the wearer removes the mask and blots the flowing blood; this adds power to the mask.

The other item is a neck pouch made of two complete summer weasel skins, with a beaded pouch sewn between. The beaded design is a white buffalo head on a blue background, which indicates that this

was a gift from the buffalo. The bottom of the pouch has long fringes with two brass French beads attached to each fringe. Inside the pouch are five black feathers approximately six inches long which were worn in the hair of the tattooer when using the bundle.

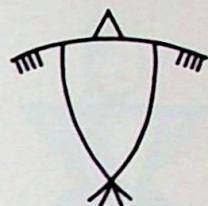
### HISTORY

The earliest known owner of this tattooing bundle was a nomadic warrior named *Kahneeokeesikopanis* or Four Sky Thunder. His name first appears in the Indian Department annuity records in 1875 when he was paid with White Bear's Saulteaux band at Fort Qu'Appelle. In 1876 he was with Cowesses, another Saulteaux at Fort Walsh, where there was a large gathering of mixed Cree, Saulteaux and Assiniboine searching for the rapidly disappearing buffalo herds. Two years later he was with a group of stragglers paid at Sounding Lake, Alberta, while in 1879 he was part of a fractional group of the White Bear band at Fort Walsh. In 1881 he was with the Piapot band of mixed Cree, Saulteaux and Assiniboine at Fort Walsh and from 1882 to 1885 he was a Minor Chief with Big Bear's Cree.

Usually people like Four Sky Thunder visited and travelled with other bands because they had relatives who could be relied upon to provide hospitality and protection. Because he lived with bands generally regarded as Saulteaux, Cree-Assiniboine and Plains Cree, it is reasonable to assume that he was of mixed parentage. During the rebellion year of 1885, Four Sky Thunder was involved in the Frog Lake Massacre, was tried, convicted in Battleford, and sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment for burning the Roman Catholic Church at Frog Lake. Released after six years' confinement, he returned to the Battleford area in 1891 and spent his remaining years as a member of the Poundmaker band.

The next known owner of the tattooing bundle was *Muskwa*, or Bear, a Battle River Cree who was born about 1858 and died in 1948. After Little Pine signed adhesion to Treaty Six in 1879, *Muskwa* was registered as a member of that band and spent the rest of his life on that reserve. *Muskwa* was considered by the Cree to have been a brave warrior and a powerful medicine man. Mandelbaum mentioned that he "... had been a famous warrior and was well acquainted with the old life. More taciturn than Fine Day, his shamanistic capabilities were renowned" (Mandelbaum 1940:163).

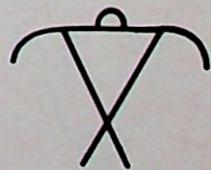
After *Muskwa*'s death, his son Robert Bear ac-



Thunderbird  
Woods Cree  
& Ojibwa



Hand  
Plains Cree



Thunderbird  
Plains Cree

Manito  
Plains CreeOld Man Stone  
Plains CreeBuffalo Spirit  
Plains Cree

quired the bundle and transferred it to Solomon Seep-ekwaskun, or Solomon Bluehorn. Born on Poundmaker's Reserve in September 1891, he was a nephew of Poundmaker and his mother a close relative of both Big Bear and Fine Day. When Bluehorn was about 35 years of age, his wife died and he began to roam, never having a permanent home until the day he died. He probably knew every reserve in southern Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta and Montana. He was familiar with all the old people and participated in religious ceremonies for he was well versed in all aspects of Cree and Saulteaux religion. In the 1930's Mandelbaum employed him as an interpreter. When I first began to travel on the Saskatchewan Cree reserves, Bluehorn always accompanied me and was at that time living in an abandoned Oldsmobile car, complete with wood stove, on the banks of the Battle River near Cut Knife Hill. He seemed to have "relations" on all reserves, and friends both Indian and white wherever he travelled. He died in 1964.

### TRANSFER CEREMONY

In September 1953, Bluehorn transferred the bundle to me, at which time he received the assistance of Frank Knife of the Sweet Grass Reserve. The transfer took place near the Battle River on Little Pine Reserve, the location considered a sacred area. Within view stood the old frames of thirst dance and sweat lodges. Nearby in a small bush, a *manitokan*, or carved effigy, stood surrounded by offerings of print cloth, old guns, copper pails and mirrors. On many of the trees in the area hung bits of bright cloth and tobacco offerings.

First, a "clean" place was selected, a small stone pipe and sweet grass smudge were lit. Prayers were said to the Great Spirit above, the spirits in the east, south, west and north, then to the earth. Both men prayed to the "Buffalo that Walks like a Man" asking for his help, protection and understanding. The spirit was told that the reason for the transfer was because their old people were all dead, they themselves were getting old, and the younger generation did not understand the old ways and would not treat these sacred items with proper respect. After the songs and prayers, the bundle and the hands of the two Indians were held over a sweet grass smudge. All the cloth wrappings were put aside and the contents retied into cloth wrappings which I had bought for the occasion. The old wrappings were tied to a small poplar tree trunk and, with tobacco and sweet grass, were left as an offering to the spirit of the "Buffalo that Walks like a Man".

### DECLINE OF TATTOOING PRACTICES

It is evident from the preceding that tattooing was once common to all the Ojibwa, Cree and their neighbors. Today, ceremonial tattooing is remembered by only a few of the old people; the young are not familiar with it at all. Occasionally, one sees circles, dots or hearts on wrists and arms but these are only for show and have no particular significance.

Mrs. J. B. Pinay of Peepokesis Reserve and Mrs. Allan Starr of Star Blanket Reserve state that *Ahkoo-moose*, widow of Plains Cree treaty Chief Little Black Bear, was the last woman in File Hills to have had the tattooed lip-chin lines. She died about 1913. Neither remembers any males with body tattoo. Mrs. Jack Fisher of the Star Blanket Reserve, who died at 90 year of age in 1968, said that the last tattooed man she remembered was her father, Chief Star Blanket, after whom the reserve was named. Emile Piapot of Piapot Reserve remembers *Oh-say-scum-me-cow* or Little Hill, his half-brother John's mother, had lip-chin marks on her face. She died an old woman about 1925.

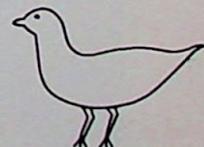
In the Touchwood Hills region, Frank Buffalo of Day Star Reserve, said that *Kee-way-tin*, or North Wind, of Day Star's band, had his chest all covered with tattooed lines. He died about 1910 and was over 90 years of age. The last tattooed woman there was Mrs. Long Man of Gordon's Reserve who was 85 years old when she died about 1924. She also had lip-chin lines.

Mrs. William Whitehat, an elderly woman living on the Sakimay Reserve in southern Saskatchewan, drew an illustration of the tattooed marks that she remembers on the chest of her grandfather, *Kah-kee-kay-in-nuk* (Everlasting Star). He was a member of the Sakimay band and died about 1940 at the age of 105 years. She also drew an illustration of the tattoos of *Pee-chim-ah-nace* who died "many years ago". She was the last woman with tattooed lines on Ochapowace Reserve.

This disappearance of the painful practice of tattooing is not surprising, for its decline was noted as early as 1851. In that year, Rudolph Kurz, who was at Fort Union on the Upper Missouri, observed that tattoo marks were not much in vogue "when people began to wear clothes". He believed it was a holdover from primitive times and that it was "the naked primitive man's first means of decoration." (Hewitt 1937:173).



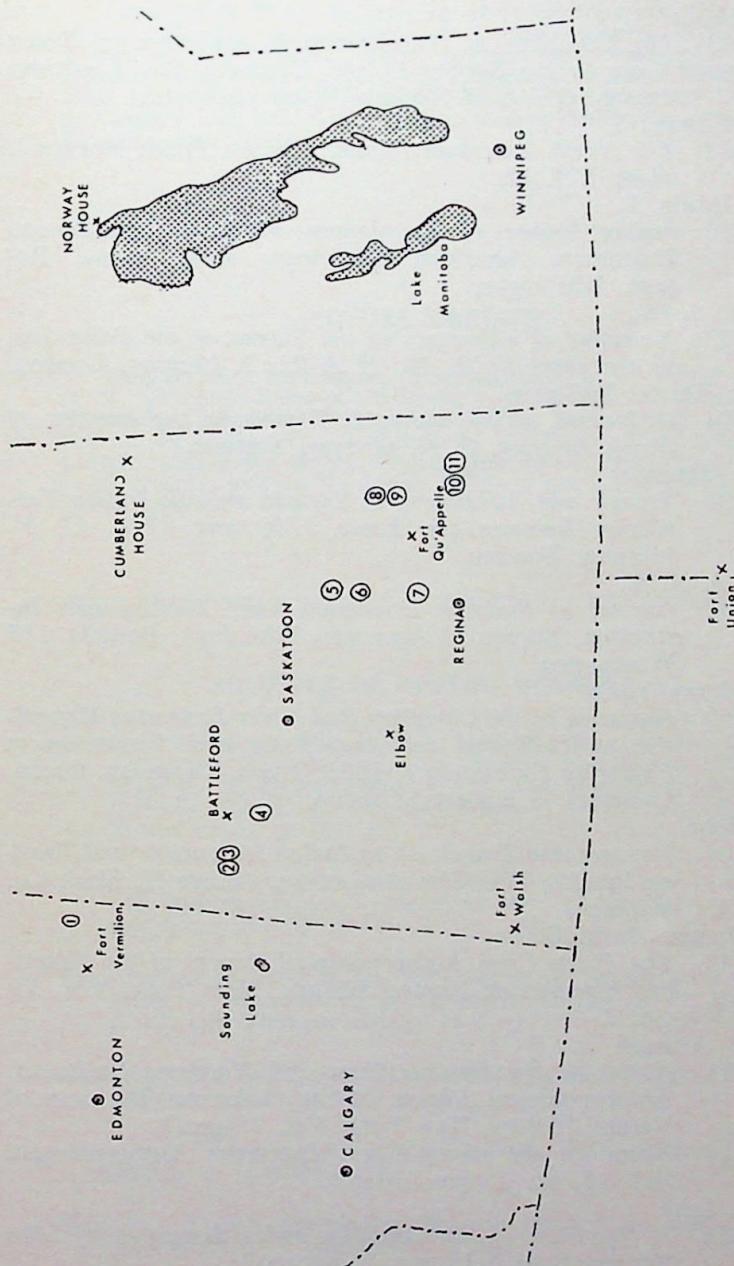
Rattlesnake  
Plains Cree



Baby Thunderbird  
Cree



These are three of the known owners of the tattooing bundle. At upper left is Four Sky Thunder, photographed at Fort Pitt in 1884. At upper right is Bear, or Muskwa, who was born in about 1858 and who obtained the bundle from Four Sky Thunder. At left is Solomon Bluehorn, the author's primary informant, who obtained the bundle from Bear's son.



The distribution of Cree tattooing practices as discussed in this booklet are indicated in this map. The numbers identify Indian reserves, as follows: 1. Frog Lake; 2. Little Pine; 3. Poundmaker; 4. Sweetgrass; 5. Day Star; 6. Gordon's; 7. Piapot; 8. Starblanket; 9. Peapeekesis; 10. Sakimay; 11. Ochapawace.

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### PICTURE CREDITS

Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., — cover and p. 5; Glenbow-Alberta Institute, pp. 2, 14, 15 and 20; Bernisches Historisches Museum, Berne, Switzerland, pp. 6, 7, 8 & 10 (left); The Plains Cree, by David Mandelbaum, (1940), p. 9; Notes on the Plains Cree, by A. Skinner (1914), p. 10 (right); and D. W. Light, Calgary, pp. 3, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18 and 19.

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### SOURCES OF TATTOO DESIGNS

Solomon Bluehorn, Poundmaker Reserve, Sask. Plains Cree designs — Thunderbird, p. 3; Buffalo that Walks Like a Man, p. 12; Grizzly Bear, p. 12; Old Man Stone, p. 18; Buffalo Spirit, p. 18; Rattlesnake, p. 19; and Baby Thunderbird, p. 19.

Solomon Bluehorn, Poundmaker Reserve, Sask. Woods Cree and Ojibwa designs — Skeleton Man, p. 13; Otter, p. 16; and Thunderbird, p. 17.

Sam Swimmer, Sweetgrass Reserve, Sask. Plains Cree designs — Thunderbird, p. 12; Horse Tracks, p. 13; Hand, p. 17; and Thunderbird, p. 17.

Mrs. Adelaide Starr, Starblanket Reserve, Sask. Plains Cree design — Thunderbird, p. 13.

Mrs. Jack Fisher, Starblanket Reserve, Sask. Plains Cree design — Manito, p. 18.

Mrs. Jack Fisher, Starblanket Reserve, Sask. Cree and Ojibwa design — Thunderbird, p. 16.

Big Knife, Starblanket Reserve, Sask. Plains Cree design — Manito, p. 16.

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