

## **NITS-STI-TA-PII: The Real People**

### **Imataa Manistsi: Blackfoot Dog Travois**

By Mari King (Blackfeet), Browning, Montana, 2010

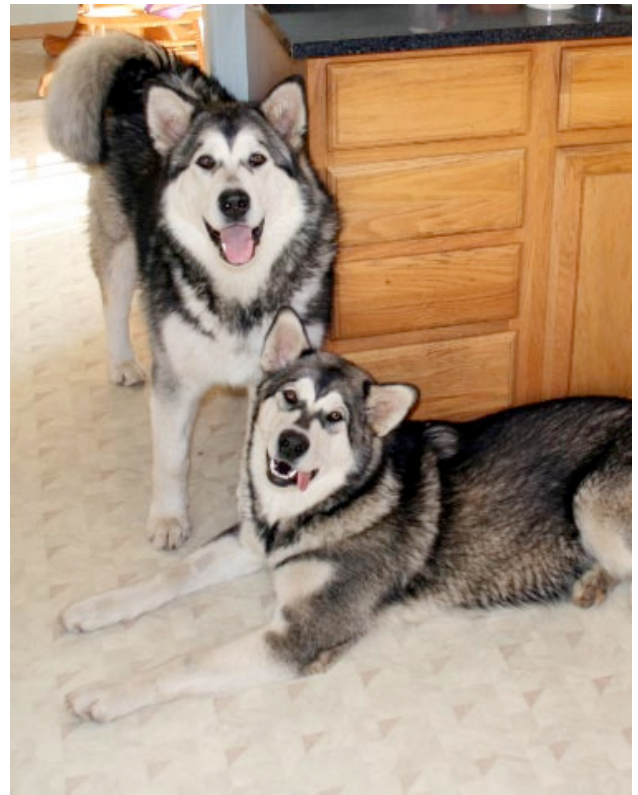
Reconnections with the historic Blackfoot shirts inspires the reconnection of the Blackfoot dog travois of the “Dog Days” era. This era predates European contact, fur trappers, and trading posts. A way of life both shirt and travois, ancient art and ancient memory reconnect in their reconstruction.

The following travois instruction is appropriate for young adults and adults. Seemingly simple in design, it is not. Easy to make, it is. It is with great surprise that individuals constructing the travois find greater understanding on the considerable depth of contemplation and thought that the Blackfoot set forth in their design of this travois which is unlike other tribes. It is unique in design and construction. A smaller or larger model than 18 inches can be made by adjusting the overall size to fit.



Soski, or Heavy Face, wife of White Calf, Blood Reserve, Fort MacLeod, AB, Canada. Glenbow Museum NA-769-4 (photograph) Date: 1916. Used with permission.

Hi, I'm Mari King. I'm a Southern Pikunni (Amskapipikani) Blackfeet woman and I live near the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, Montana. I'm an artist—and I love my dogs!



Left: photograph of Mari King, Blackfeet, at Upper Two-Medicine Camp Ground Summer of 2009. Standing by her 2007 Jeep, 'Liberty.'

Right: photograph of 2 female Alaskan Malamutes. Simba is standing and Tahsha is lying down. Mari King (owner) photo taken summer 2009, East Glacier Park, MT.

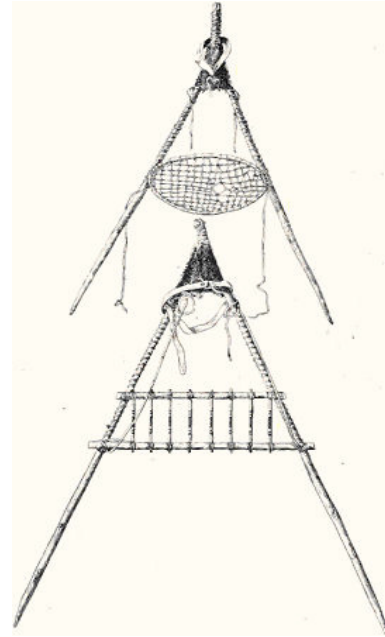
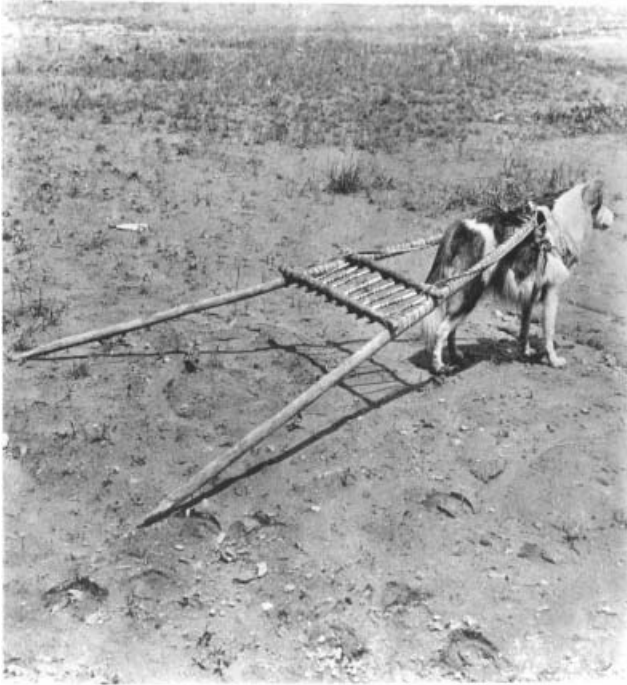
## Blackfoot Shirts and Blackfoot Dog Travois

From late 1700s to the early 1900s the Blackfoot Nation in Canada and United states were in a time of great tribal changes due to the introduction of “Big Dog” (the horse), trading post/company and goods, Governmental institutions, fur trappers, and much more. One of these changes included the greater use of the horse for travel and transportation replacing the familial dog and dog travois, paramount to a life way. Reconstruction of the Blackfoot dog travois is liken to the reconstruction of the Blackfoot shirt, a way of life not forgotten, only sleeping in our memory.



Caption: Blood Women with dog travois, Southern Alberta, Canada (photo) NA-659-11 Glenbow Museum Date: 1924. L-R Double Victory Woman (J. Cotton's mother), Mrs White Bull (Heavy Face), and Mrs White Calf. Man on horse is Black Looking. Used with permission.

## IMATAA MANISTSI



Left: photograph of Blackfoot Dog Travois. American Museum of Natural History #31508  
Right: Clark Wissler, "Material Culture of the Blackfoot Indians," Volume 5, Issues 1-2. Two types of travois according to Clark Wissler information collected: Figure 56 (a/b) of book; pages 88 - 92 of 175.

### How to Make a Dog Travois Model

These instructions are for an 18 inch dog travois model. Making a model is a great way to learn about the construction of a travois before beginning a life size one. By making a model first, a person will avoid making time consuming mistakes when making a full size travois. Plus, once the 18 inch model is completed, there is a greater understanding of the unique construction of the Blackfoot dog travois that focuses upon how the weight is distributed to the benefit of the dog's energy, endurance, and physical comfort. Adjustments therefore to the construction of a life size travois are easily made and understood. Willow sticks are ideal to use because they are fairly straight and flexible.

Blackfoot children were taught to make small scale travois which prepared them for later, when older, to properly make a travois that is perfect for their dog. It enhanced the child's understanding on the importance of caring for a dog, and looking after his needs. Blackfeet dogs were working dogs that transported family belongings and helped the family in daily life.

## **How to Construct an 18 inch model of a Blackfoot Dog Travois**

### **Materials Needed:**

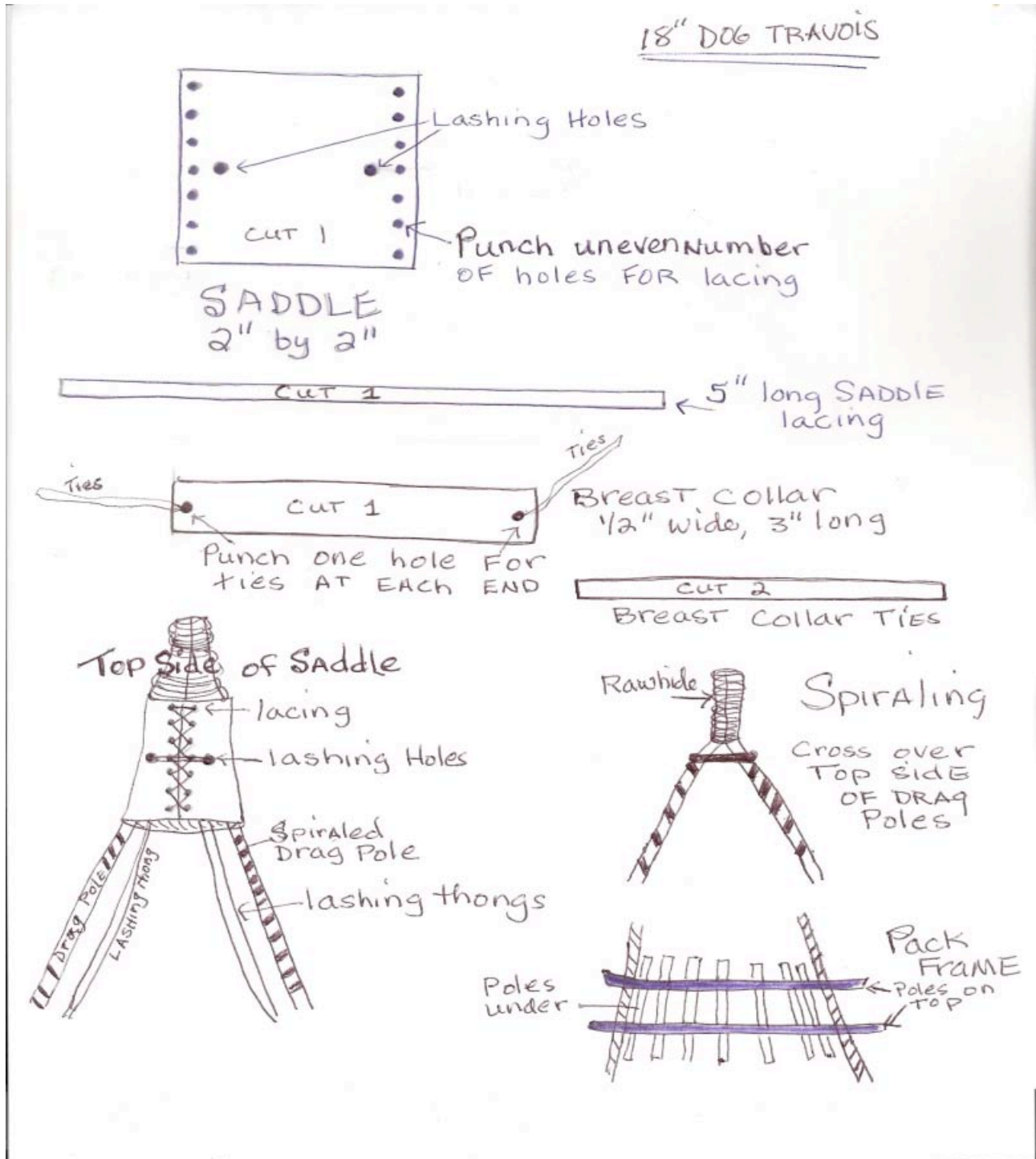
- 5 foot length of sinew or pre-soaked narrow rawhide lace (1/4" or less in width)
- 4 willow sticks (for travois poles and carrying frame), pre-soaked (for model, 18" sticks are ideal)
- One 2" square strip of soft leather (for saddle)
- 1 long skinny piece of soft leather 5 inches long (for lacing)
- 1/2 inch wide by 3 inch long soft leather (for dog's breast collar)
- 2 narrow strips of soft leather 3" long each (for ties)
- 1 narrow strip of soft leather 5" long (for cinch/belly strap)

### **Tools**

- Scissors (for cutting leather/rawhide)
- Leather hole puncher
- Pruning shears (to cut willow sticks)
- Sandpaper
- Utility knife

***\* an overnight soaking of some materials is required before you start making the travois***

**Picture Instructions: Travois Parts and Construction**



sketch by Mari King

## **Instructions:**

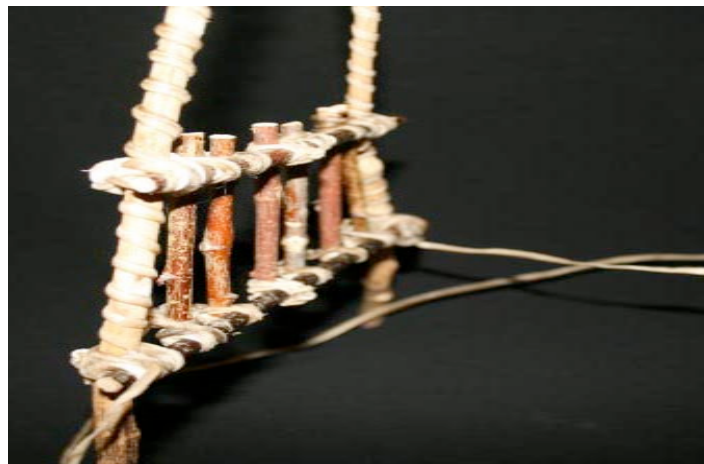
**Step 1: Prepare travois drag poles.** These are the long poles which drag behind the dog. Peel bark from 2 willow sticks, pruning and sanding any rough, jagged or protruding edges.

**Step 2: Soaking.** Immerse about 1 inch of the skinner end of each pole tip in water and soak over night. Soak all rawhide strips overnight or for at least 5 hours before use.

**Step 3: Lashing the main frame.** Lying the willow poles side by side, tie the top tip ends together with presoaked rawhide. The ends should not overlap or cross. Go around the top tips of willow several times until you cannot see the willow under the rawhide. This will cover about 1 inch in length of the top tips.

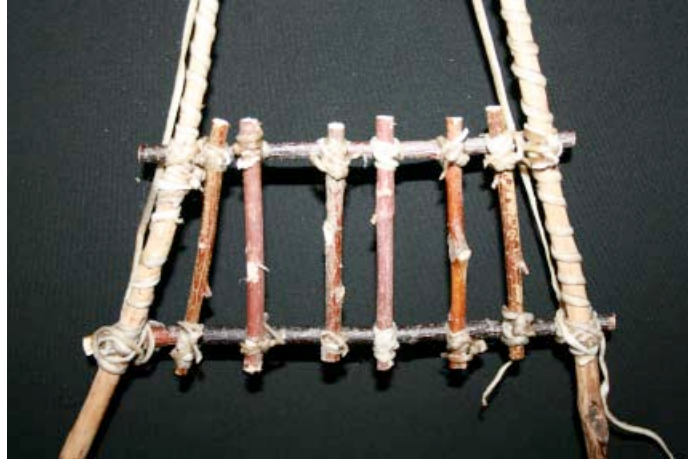
Note: When using imitation sinew for the 18" model travois and tying the top tips together, tie tightly & securely because the tips tend to slip out of place. To eliminate this, use soaked rawhide instead.

**Step 4: Pack Frame.** Cut one pole 6 inches, and the second pole 8 inches. These are the horizontal cross bars for the frame pack. With wet rawhide strips tie them onto the 2 drag poles. Place the 8 inch pole about 4 1/2 to 5 inches from bottom and the 6 inch pole about 7 1/2 to 8 inches from bottom (3 inches apart). Use a figure eight or diagonal style of wrapping when securing the cross poles to the travois drag poles.



**Step 5:** Cut 6 to 8 vertical poles for the pack frame. These poles should overlap the horizontal cross poles at least 1/3 inch on each end. Secure the poles to the pack underside of the horizontal pack frame with the soaked rawhide strips using a figure eight wrap.

Note: Step 5 securing the vertical poles to the under-side of pack frame. The purpose for the under-side of the pack frame is that it allows the bend in the vertical poles. As well, the pull from the bend pulls the drag poles inward, thereby further distributing the weight of the travois. It is much more pleasant to ride on too.



**Step 6: Spiral wrapping the Poles.** Using a 5 foot length of soaked rawhide thong or sinew, tie it to the bottom rung of pack frame horizontal pole. Then start spiraling up the pole to the crotch of the saddle area.

Cross over to the other pole on the topside of drag poles (see picture instructions on crossing over) and spiral down the pole to the bottom rung and tie securely.





**Step 7: Making the Saddle.** (See the drawing instructions and punch holes as directed). Lay the square leather saddle piece on flat surface and place the travois tips in the center of the saddle. Position the travois top tips so that the 2 poles that are tied together lap over the top edge of the saddle leather piece.

Fold over the leather and lace the saddle together with a long strip of soft tanned leather, as you would tie a shoe. Tie securely closed. After the saddle is laced closed, slip it over the top tips and fit into place.

Note: Historically for a large scale Dog Travois the Blackfoot used fur pelts or scrap fur to make the saddle. The fur side is out. Tanned leather was not used.

**Step 8: Lashing the Drag Poles.** Tie a long rawhide thong to the bottom rung of the pack frame. Bring this loosely up the drag pole, pass through one of the center holes from the inside of the saddle & bring out the top of the saddle.

Then bring lashing over the top outside and back down through the second center hole. The lashing will come out from under the saddle.

Bring lashing loosely down the drag pole and tie securely to the bottom rung of pack frame. \*See drawing instructions

**Step 9: Breast Collar & Cinch.** Punch a small hole in each end of the breast collar. Using two 3 inch narrow strips of leather, tie the Breast Collar to the center of the saddle onto the lashing. Tie the cinch to each of the travois drag poles just behind the dog's fore legs.

**Step 10: VOILA !!** You are ready to roll with your dog! No dog? That is okay, it is common for a human person to pull a loaded travois themselves.

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### **ADAPTING INSTRUCTIONS TO MAKE A FULL-SIZE TRAVOIS**

Making the eighteen inch travois model prepares the way to make a full size travois. By doing so, a person gains a greater understanding of the construction of a travois and why it is made the way it is. Once the model is made, minor adjustments in materials are applied to a full size travois. In particular, the saddle construction (step 7), breast collar (step 9) and materials & construction are different. Cotton rope is used for the lashing, and various materials may be used to make a sturdy breast collar and cinch. A stiffer grain but flexible leather, such as the kind that is used to make a belt or wide nylon webbing, are ideal for a breast collar and cinch.

Types of wood to use are Jack Pine, Cherry, Aspen or Willow. The diameter across the

base of the pole is about 1.5 to 3 inches and sometimes larger. Diameter of the pole depends on how strong the dog is and the weight of the wood after it thoroughly dries. Cherry wood (choke cherry) is ideal because it is light weight, very straight, slim, very solid and hard.

Also, keep in mind how much weight your dog can comfortably pull. Start with a light pack or no pack at all for practice. As the dog gets used to pulling and builds muscle more weight can be added, a little at a time. It is best to start training a dog to pull a travois from a very young age. Riding on the travois seems like great fun to children, but they can be too heavy for most dogs. Dogs also need lots of water breaks during training and pulling.

### **Materials Needed**

Rawhide

Imitation sinew

A Large Needle (such as leather, upholstery, canvas or carpet)

Fur pelt (shirred or natural pile sheepskin works well)

Cotton rope for Lashing (clothes line rope works fine)

Breast collar & Cinch material (discussed below in instructions)

First, measure the length of your dog from the back of the nap of the neck to the tail bone. Multiply this number by at least 2.5 or 3. For example, if a dog is 25 inches then the length 25 inches multiplied by 3 equals 75 inches. Thus, the drag poles will be between 62 1/2 inches to 75 inches.

At this time decide the lengths of rawhide that you will need for (1) the spiraling of the poles (2) to tie the drag poles tip ends together and (3) for securing the vertical bars onto the pack frame.

To measure what the length of the rawhide strip will be for the spiraling (step 6), multiply by four the length of a drag pole. For example, if the drag pole is 75 inches, multiply 75 times 4, which equals 300 inches or 25 feet. Thus, the spiral length of the drag pole rawhide is 25 feet long and about 1 inch wide. Each tie for the vertical poles is about 2 feet long and 1/4 to 1/3 inch wide.

A long piece of rawhide is needed to tie the tip ends together as well, at least 9 feet and 1/4 to 1/3 inch wide. The skinnier the rawhide ties are the better. Soak all rawhide pieces overnight before cutting into strips, and then re-soak again before using for spiraling, and ties.

Second, choose 2 fairly straight drag poles, and 2 more poles that will be used for the cross (horizontal or pack) bars. Peel all the poles and sand smooth with various grades of sand paper. If the skin of the pole is difficult to remove, soak the poles for a minimum of over night or until the skin softens. Once peeled, place the 2 skinniest ends of the drag poles (tip ends) in a bucket of cool water about one foot deep to soak. Let soak overnight.

Third, follow step 3 of the 18 inch travois instruction. In addition, when the tip ends are tied together (as tight as possible), use old rags (old cotton sheets are good) torn into 2 inch wide long strips to wrap tightly around the rawhide covered tips . Wrap the strips as tight as possible over the rawhide, covering all the rawhide and tip ends. Leave to completely dry before removing the rag strips. This time period may be a few days or longer depending on the weather humidity and heat.

Step 4: the Pack Frame. Place the first horizontal bar about 18 inches to 2 feet from where the dog's rump (buttocks) will be. For example a measurement of a 25 inch dog with a 75 inch drag pole frame; the first horizontal bar placement nearest to the dogs rump will be the length of the dog, 25 inches, plus 24 inches which equals 49 inches. Therefore place the first horizontal bar 43 inches to 49 inches from the crotch of the tip ends of the drag poles (rawhide tied tip ends). Tie securely with figure-8 rawhide strips as before in the 18 inch model. Then place the second horizontal bar approximately 12 to 18 inches below the first.

Step 5: Add the pack frame vertical bars as in step 5 of 18 inch model. Be sure to secure the vertical bars to the under-side of the pack frame.

Step 6: Spiral the poles with rawhide strip as in step 6 of the 18 inch model instructions.

Step 7: Make the Saddle as in step 7 of the 18 inch model but use a fur pelt instead of soft leather. Important, do not make punch holes as in the 18 inch instructions in step 7 of Making the Saddle. Instead, sew the center seam edges together with imitation sinew using a sharp needle such as a leather, upholstery, canvas or carpet needle . When sewing the center seam, keep in mind the lashing will come up through the center seam of the sewn edges in the middle of the saddle instead of protruding through 2 punched holes. Thus when sewing the center seam leave a little space opening about 1 inch long wherein the lashing will poke up through from the inside/underside of the fur saddle.

Step 8: Follow the directions of lashing the Drag Poles as in step 8 of the 18 inch model using cotton rope and with this change: After one end of the lashing is secured to the bottom rung of the pack frame, bring the lashing loosely up the drag poles to the saddle. Bring lashing up through and back down again into the same center seam of the saddle (like a loop). Leave this length of lashing about 10 inches long and proceed to tie the other end loosely onto the other bottom rung. The loop piece of the lashing is used to tie the breast collar onto as in step 9. This is an important step because when the breast collar is secured to this lashing, the thrust of the dog pulling the travois is a force that pulls the pack frame and not so much the drag poles.

Step 9: Breast Collar & Cinch. Follow the instructions for step 9 of the 18 inch model and use material that is appropriate for this large travois size. Strong flexible cowhide that is strong can be used. The kind of cowhide that is used to make leather belts works great. Also wide heavy duty nylon webbing that is 2 inches wide or more works

fine too. Measure the width of the dog's breast and then add a few inches more so that the collar extends to the sides of the dog, about 3 or 4 inches from the sides of the saddle.

Punch 2 holes in each of the ends and lace with leather pieces or other strong fiber lacing.

Tie each side of the collar lacing onto the center of the saddle in which the lashing protrudes through the center seam.

Cinch: Estimate approximately where the backside of the dog's foreleg will be and tie one side of the cinch to the drag poles. Leave the other side free to hang until the dog is harnessed to the travois.

### Placing the Travois onto the Dog

While dog is standing place the collar over the head of the dog and rest the saddle onto the nap of the head/neck area and quickly tie the cinch around the back of the foreleg. The tied cinch secures the dog in place and the dog cannot therefore walk out of the travois.

Please note that several things happen when the dog begins to move forward with a travois:

- (1) Because the lashing is tied to the center of the saddle and down to the pack frame, and
- (2) because the breast collar is tied to the lashing, the dog pulls on the pack's weight instead of carrying the pole weight directly and dragging them. The forward movement of the dog pulls on the pack weight from across the chest. As well, the breast plate attachment to the center of saddle top distributes the push/thrust from the dog's chest across the front, and not so much on neck & shoulder pull.

### Thoughts to Consider

Historically the Blackfoot would have greased their travois poles to protect the wood and prolong the life use of the travois. Today we have available to us a variety of animal and vegetable grease and oils. Staining the wood is another idea to protect the wood, or using an acrylic polyurethane coating.

Freshly cut poles are easier to peel or skin. If they dry rock hard and the skinning becomes difficult, soaking is the best way to ease the process of peeling. When soaking the long poles becomes a "I wonder how I am going to do it" kind of task, try the bathtub. Leaning the poles against the wall of the tub, place dripping wet bath towels over the entire length of the poles wetting them everyday once or twice.

When making the travois, sometimes the poles dry and shrink in size and the rawhide ties may become loose as a result. To remedy this looseness, either retie the rawhide ties (soak first), or tie over the existing rawhide with newly soaked rawhide strips. The drag pole tips can also be re-tied with rawhide.

If by chance the neck section is too long and does not rest properly on the nap of the neck area, saw some of it off and retie.

### **Context: Blackfoot Historical Information**

The early major bands of Blackfoot are the Piegan (Pikunii), Kainai (Blood) and Siksika whose homeland territory stretched from the Northern Rockies of Alberta, Canada, into Montana and northern parts of Wyoming, USA. Originally they called themselves NITS-STI-TA-PII: The Real People.

Historically, the Blackfoot were nomadic and moved seasonally for food supplies and to find shelter from harsh winter weather. They followed the Buffalo, which was their mainstay for food, clothing and lodges. Since being placed onto reservations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a fourth band, called the Southern Piegan or Blackfeet, developed in what is now Montana.

‘Dog days’ of the Blackfoot is a historical time before the coming of the horse to the Blackfoot in the early 1700s. Prior to the 1700s the Blackfoot depended upon trained dogs to carry a load on their back or by travois. The travois is made of 2 poles whose front tips converge for attachment at the dog’s shoulders while the butt ends of the poles dragged on the ground. Near the ground end of the travois is a frame that was shaped in the form of a hoop or a ladder. When tied upon the hoop or ladder, as much as 60 to 100 pounds could be dragged by a dog. The weight of the load carried depended upon the health, muscle and size of the dog. The dog travois carried many different items such as buffalo meat, tipi/lodges (made of heavy buffalo hide), clothing, firewood, and household goods. Babies could also be carried on a dog travois. For larger weighted loads sometimes 2 or more dogs were used to pull one travois. Elderly or infirm persons could be carried on a travois too.

The exact breed of dog the Blackfoot might have used is unknown. Oral history has it that the Blackfoot dog was large, as large as an Alaskan Malamute, and perhaps even larger. We have stories of buffalo dogs that were known to be white plains wolves that traveled with the Blackfoot to hunt the buffalo.

Travel was slow with a travois. The number of miles averaged 5 to 10 a day depending on the landscape terrain and weather.

The dog travois is made of wood (willow, aspen or pine), animal skin, sinew and

rawhide rope. The average length of a dog travois is about 7 feet to almost 10 feet. Length depends upon the size of the dog. The poles must measure a minimum of 2 to 2 1/2 times the length of the dog.

The Blackfoot dog travois is unique and different from other tribal styles. Clark Wissler described it in 1910 based on information given him by Elders:

. . . . the purpose of the peculiar lashing noticed in all travois is now apparent; the draft is by the thong and not by the poles. In the dog travois where the crossing thong is concealed in the saddle, the breast strap, or yoke, is fastened by a thong passing through the saddle and around the crossing thong. By this ingenious contrivance, the pull is upon the pack frame, rather than upon the poles and the possibility of the load being lost by the poles pulling out is reduced to a minimum.... . . so far as data at hand go, the Blackfoot dog travois are the only ones in which the poles do not cross at the apex . . .” (Wissler 1910:92).

Wissler is describing the design of the Blackfoot dog travois and its weight distribution upon the dog from the pack frame. Therefore, the dog is not so much carrying the weight of the poles upon his shoulders as he is the pack frame. This is unlike other styles of dog travois other than Blackfoot.

Another feature that is unique to the Blackfoot style of dog travois is the carrier or pack frame construction. The two horizontal cross bars are tied to the top side of the 2 drag poles. The vertical pack frame bars are on the bottom of the 2 horizontal cross bars. This unique construction allows for pack frame distribution plus any weight put onto the frame tends to pull the long 2 drag poles down and in towards the frame. This gives a slight bend in the overall pack frame, which reduces further weight on the dog shoulders and places it more on the pack frame.

In addition the saddle made of fur pelt provided cushioning for the shoulder area and attached to it was the dog’s breast collar. No separate dog harness or shoulder padding is needed in this style of dog travois. The cinch is tied to the drag poles.

When Blackfoot people obtained horses in the early 1700s, the dog travois was modified to the size of a horse. Thereafter the Blackfoot was able to travel 30 to 50 miles a day. The introduction of the horse changed the lives of the Blackfoot people as the horse could carry more than a dog, the family lodge became larger and more items could be carried from camp to camp. The horse travois is made of lodge pole pine about 18 feet long, and rawhide rope. The platform or cradle to carry belongings is about 10 to 12 feet from front tip of poles.

### **Further resources:**

Clark Wissler's work contain numerous references to dog travois:

-Wissler, C. 1910. *Material Culture of the Blackfoot Indians*, Volume 5, Issues 1-2. See especially pp. 88-92.

--1908. *Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians* Vol. 2, 107, 1908. See sections on 'The Dog-Chief,' Origin story of dog skin medicine, and "The Dogs Society."

--1913. *Societies of the Plains Indians*. 'The Dog Society.'

See also:

Grinnell, George. 1892. *Blackfoot Lodge Tales*. Section 'Emitaks (E'mi-taks, dogs): A society of the Ikunuhkahtsi, or the All Comrades, in the Piegan Tribe,' p. 221.

First Rider, George. 1969. "Construction Techniques of Whistles, Dog Travois, Bow and Arrows." Provincial Museum and Archives of Alberta. Tape number IH-AA.073; transcript Disc 54, 6 pages. Interview date February 21, 1969. Available online at: <http://dspace.cc.uregina.ca/dspace/bitstream/10294/576/1/IH-AA.073.pdf>

### **Vocabulary:**

Dog Travois: tra-vois, an animal-pulled sled: a sled made of two poles connected by a frame and pulled by an animal, used in the past by Native North Americans of the Great Plains. [Mid-19th century. From French , from travail , from Latin trabs , "beam." ]

Spitz Dogs: dog with curly tail: a breed of dog with a dense heavy coat, erect pointed ears, and a tightly curled tail. Malamutes (from Inupiaq, Malimiut, the name of the Alaskan people who developed the breed), and Samoyeds (Siberian dog, northern Russia) are spitzes (working dogs).



Blood Women with dog travois, Southern Alberta, Canada (photo)  
NA-659-11 Glenbow Museum, Calgary. Used with permission.