

AFDC Fight Instructor's Apprentice: Research Paper

## Weapons of the Plains-Cree

A look at the historical weaponry used in warfare  
by Plains Indigenous peoples and their applications in  
Okichitaw Indigenous Combat Arts

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Over time there have been countless different weapons, weapon forms and martial art forms that were practiced from one end of the globe to the other. Many regions had their own unique styles such as the Romans with the Shield and Spear, the Italians with the Rapier, the Japanese with the Katana, as well as the Germans with the Longsword. Everything from duelling, self defence and warfare have an extensive written history dating back centuries. All of the above mentioned have also found a place in the practice of Stage and Screen Combat. A lesser talked about and nearly forgotten style of fighting and weaponry are those that belonged to the Indigenous peoples of North America. This is because there were no written accounts from an Indigenous perspective. They did not have a formal writing system, they had an oral culture. The fighting styles and weaponry of the Plains-Cree have had a resurgence over the last few decades and this integral piece of Native history has been resurrected. The **Okichitaw** Indigenous combat system is a martial art form based on the fighting styles of the Plains-Cree peoples and it is a collective of Indigenous wrestling, weaponry and tactics. It is my intention to not only continue studying this fascinating and rewarding discipline but to translate it into a form that will be used in the art of Stage and Screen Combat. Here we will look at some cultural history of the Plains-Cree warriors between the 15th and 18th centuries and how some of their weapons were created and used, with a focus on the four main weapons studied in Okichitaw; the Knife, the Lance, the Tomahawk and the unique Gunstock War Club.

Indigenous peoples of North-America have a very rich history dating back to pre-colonial times all the way to the present. From their cultural and ceremonial practices, hunting and trapping methods, arts and crafts, and even their up and mostly down relationship with the European settlers and later the American and Canadian governments. Almost all accounts that have been recorded since the settlers set foot in North-America have been fairly negative, depicting them being unintelligent, foolish, savage, gullible and weak at warfare. In 1958, John K. Mahon wrote "Indians [were] virtually without discipline"<sup>1</sup>. Jon M. White wrote in 1980 that although the main occupation of the Indian males was war, nevertheless, "the Indian had no feeling for grand strategy, was a sketchy tactician, and was nothing more than a primitive warrior."<sup>2</sup> The literature on Indigenous peoples was only from the perspective of the non-indigenous. As mentioned, they did not have a written language, it was simply an oral culture. There are countless historical accounts of pictographs and even petroglyphs which depict stories of great warriors, hunts, wars, etc. Unfortunately, a painting or carving does not give much detail into the true events that took place. This is why there were, and still are, people in every indigenous community who were designated as the keepers of traditional knowledge and/or story tellers. Due to the attempt at eradicating the history of indigenous peoples, these individuals became even more important to their dying cultures. "There was a mandate to erase that history."<sup>3</sup> Especially in the last couple of centuries, these people would have to practice in secret, and would recount the tales of their people in secret. It was through their bravery and

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<sup>1</sup> Mahone, J. K. (1958). Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare, 1676-1794. *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45, 254-275.

<sup>2</sup> White, J. M. (1980). Everyday life of the North American Indian. *Holmes & Meier Publishing*, 114-115.

<sup>3</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

diligence that their histories were preserved. These people, typically the elders of the community, had a great responsibility to give these teachings so that nothing would ever be forgotten. These people hold the title of **Okimakhan**. Okimakhan is another name for teacher or person you learn from. This is a Plains-Cree word and its literal translation is chief instructor. There could be several different Okimakhan within a community. All of them would teach many different things, and sometimes people would teach the same things as others if they have each mastered a particular skill set. The title of **Okimakhan-Kiskina-Humakew** is given to someone that is considered one of the only people you can learn a particular subject from. The Okimakhan-Kiskina-Humakew have a tremendous responsibility of ensuring that others learn from them and their teachings. The person who holds the over arching responsibility after the elders and senior members of the community have passed away is known as **Okimah**. This person ensures that all Okimakhan are on the right path and yet they continue to teach as well.

One person who holds the title of Okimakhan-Kiskina-Humakew is Mr. George J. Lepine. Lepine is of Plains-Cree and Assiniboine Indigenous heritage. Through countless hours of research, interviews with the keepers of traditional knowledge and recounting the many tactical teachings he received from his family and elders in his community, he has resurrected the martial art form practiced by his people. He has also established the only structured and formally practiced Indigenous martial art and combat system in Canada called **Okichitaw**. "Okichitaw is a unique, powerful, practical martial art system that uses basic but aggressive combat movements that were employed specifically throughout Plains Indigenous Warfare. Based on Indigenous Plains combat techniques and tactics, this current version of the combat art embodies the spirit of the Plains Warrior fighting and warfare applications through the utilization of traditional weapons. All hand, foot and body mechanics are a reflection of specific Plains Cree weaponry and their respective movements."<sup>4</sup> This martial art form is also recognized by the World Martial Arts Union (WoMAU). "Okichitaw is like a bison, the trick is to not be stupid like one. You want that power but you still gotta get the big picture."<sup>5</sup> Recently, Lepine was gifted his uncle's War Bonnet and presented with the title of Okimah of Okichitaw. "My title changed to Okimah after uncle Verne [Harper] died, which means now you're the leader of something in the community, based on Okichitaw. Actually it's the shortest name for the most responsibility."<sup>6</sup> He still awaits a dream or vision to give him direction, and until then, he will remain Okimakhan-Kiskina-Humakew.

There have been a lot of significant similarities in weapons between different regions and cultures, even on different continents. (See Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) Even though they may have been similar, there were plenty of differences in how these weapons were constructed, practiced and utilized, especially in battle. By today's standards one would consider a weapon made out of wood, stone or bone to be quite inferior, yet they were very effective and the only option for many cultures until the introduction of metals.

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<sup>4</sup> Lepine, G. (2016, September 19). Okichitaw Indigenous Combat Arts. Retrieved from <http://www.okichitaw.com/>

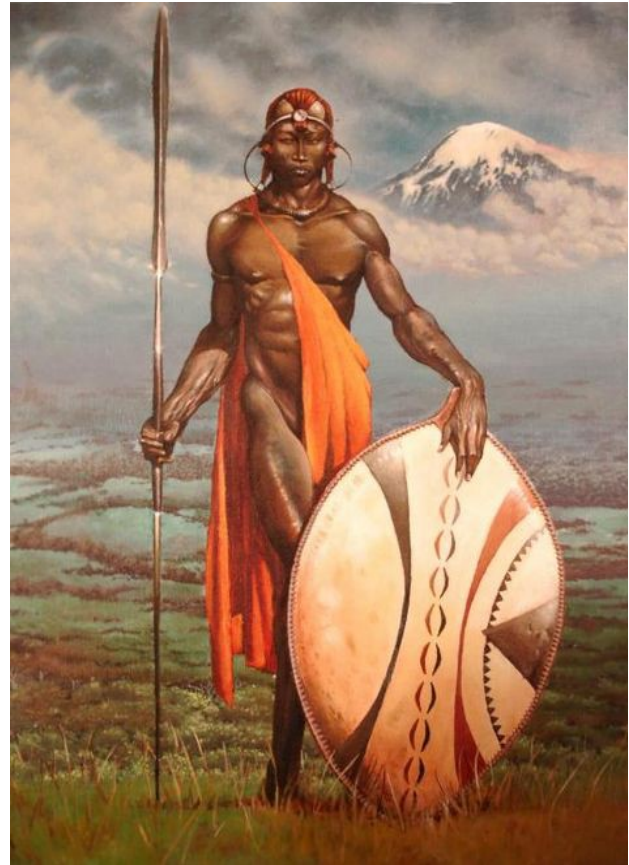
<sup>5</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

<sup>6</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

Fig. 1: Assiniboine Warrior of North America<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 2: Zulu of Southern Africa<sup>8</sup>



Knapping was a very common practice to create bladed instruments such as knives, spear and arrow heads for hunting and warfare. This process is done by chipping away flakes of a stones surface by using pressure and/or percussion. Common stones used in this process were obsidian and flint, hence how the term flint-knapping was coined. Over time weapons evolved. Not only were better, faster and stronger ways of fabricating weapons practiced but once iron and steel were introduced, it began changing the entire application of warfare and the way weaponry was made. This was especially the case when it came to the Indigenous peoples of the Plains. Prior to European contact, many intertribal wars were fought using primitive weaponry. There were several different weapons and styles of combat used among Indigenous peoples across the Plains. Each had similarities but they all had their own ways of fashioning and using such weapons. There are not many written historical accounts of Plains battle tactics yet this small quote is very succinct. Great Plains "tribal warfare was conducted mostly in quick, commando-style raids."<sup>9</sup>

The Cree people of the Plains had several different types of weapons that were all quite common throughout Indigenous territories in some variety or fashion. Some of which would not be recommended to portray violence on the stage, such as firing an arrow with

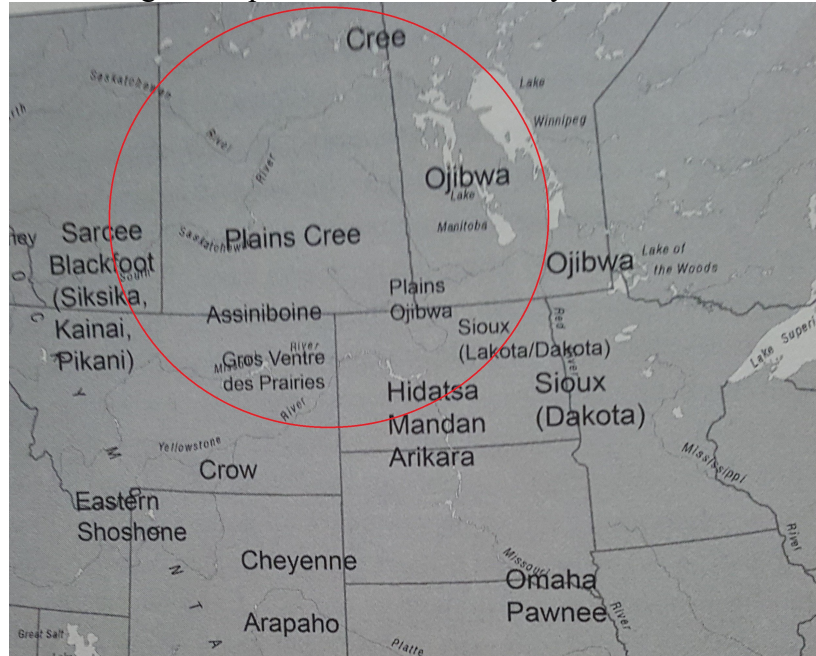
<sup>7</sup> Taylor, C. F. (2008). Native American weapons. *University of Oklahoma Press*, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Google LLC - TMA868122 (2000, October 3). African Shield and Spear. Retrieved from <https://www.google.ca/search?q=african+shield+and+spear&tbm=isch&tbs=rimg:>

<sup>9</sup> Staeger, R. (2014). Native American tools and weapons. Mason Crest, 25.

the bow or the throwing of a tomahawk at a scene partner. These will still be discussed as they are integral to the history of the Plains-Cree. Advanced Okichitaw members train with such traditional weaponry as the knife, tomahawk, lance, and the gunstock war club. Not only will these four primary weapons used in Okichitaw be discussed but other common weaponry of the Plains as well.

Fig. 3: Map of Plains Cree territory in Canada<sup>10</sup>



### **Bow and Arrow (Pimo-Ta-Kan)**

It seems as though every culture, regardless of where or when in time, had a bow and arrow system. The Plains-Cree were no different. Of all of the weapons systems of Indigenous tribes, the bow and arrow, or Pimo-Ta-Kan in the Cree language, seems to have the most published literature on its existence. It is also arguably the most commonly featured weapon of the Indigenous in film, especially in the classic Westerns. Regardless of how accurate or inaccurate they were portrayed in these films, they definitely used these tools for both hunting and warfare. The first weapons that anyone in these territories got proficient with was archery. From childhood, proper grips (see Fig. 4) and releases were practiced in the form of target shooting and small game hunting. Even though Plains warfare involved mostly close quarter combat, firing a slew of arrows from a distance before running in to attack the enemy was still a highly regarded tactic. This would be most effective in open areas and less effective in wooded areas and for sneak attacks.

There were a few different bow styles being used in Native territories, however it has been said that in the Plains, they only used two different styles. The sinew-backed/wrapped bow or the self-bow. The latter being the most common bow used. It

<sup>10</sup> Bohr, R. (2014). Gifts from the thunder beings: Indigenous archery and European firearms in the Northern Plains and Central Subarctic, 1670-1870. *University of Nebraska Press*, 30.

was also known as the northern Plains straight bow. The bows themselves were quite narrow and long. They appeared like a staff with a slight bend in it but not much of an arch. These bows "at a conservative estimate, were 5 feet 6 inches to 6 feet (1.7m to 1.8m) in length."<sup>11</sup> Standard self-bows were made of a single piece of wood, whereas the sinew-backed bows were often made of several layers of wood, bone and horn glued and wrapped in sinew. "The preferred wood was Osage orange, called the 'bois d'arc' by the French trappers... Whenever Osage orange could not be obtained, the Indians used ash, white elm, ironwood, cedar, willow, dogwood, mulberry, indeed almost any wood..."<sup>12</sup> Most bow strings were made of sinew but they were also made from vegetable fibres or strips cut from rawhide. The arrows themselves were made from an array of different woods but some of the preferred of Plains tribes were gooseberry and juneberry wood. The latter being used because it was very heavy, straight and less likely to be brittle. Lengths varied from tribe to tribe, however, "the Plains Indians used a short, sturdy arrow with long fletching feathers."<sup>13</sup> Different tools for straightening were used, such as wrenches and sanding stones made of such materials as horns, bone and stone. (See Fig. 6) Feathering or fletching the arrows helped ensure the arrow would fly straight when fired. The feathers used were typically that of wild turkeys or eagles, with the latter holding far more spiritual significance to Indigenous people. Lastly there was the arrowhead, which has evolved from sharpened sticks, to stone blades, and eventually to metal tips. The stone blades were made through the previously mentioned process of flint-knapping. The arrow heads were then slotted into a split at the head of the arrow and then fastened with sinew and glue. Once metals were introduced, stone arrowheads began to fade out as they had a tendency to break. Whereas the metal heads were smaller, thinner and stronger and could penetrate almost anything around during those times.

Fig. 4: Arrow and bow string grips<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, C. F. (2008). Native American weapons. *University of Oklahoma Press*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians. *Marlowe & Company*, 406

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, C. F. (2008). Native American weapons. *University of Oklahoma Press*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians. *Marlowe & Company*, 399

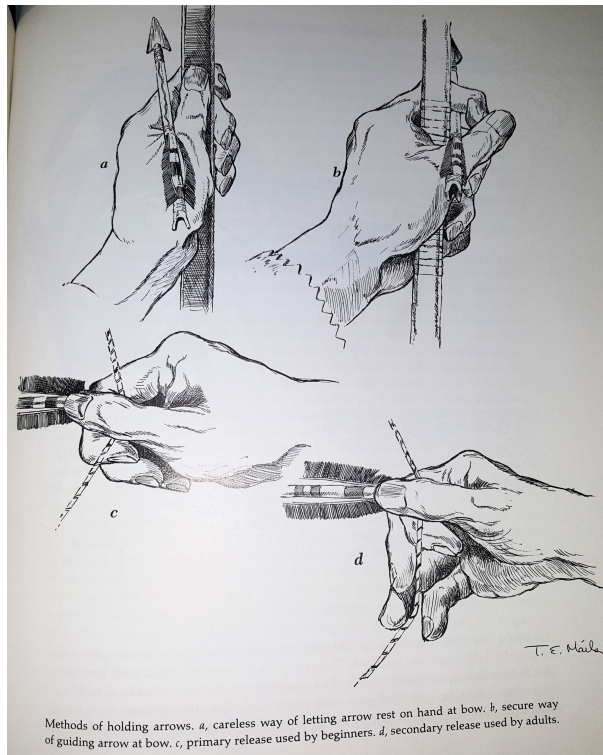
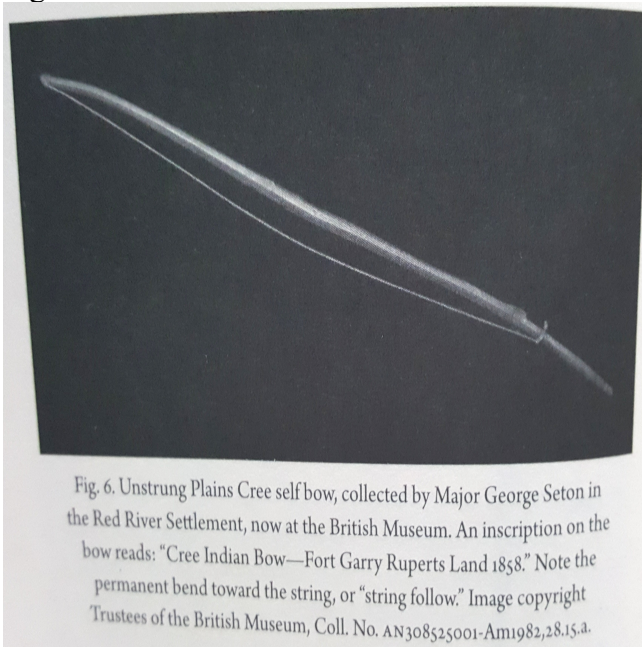
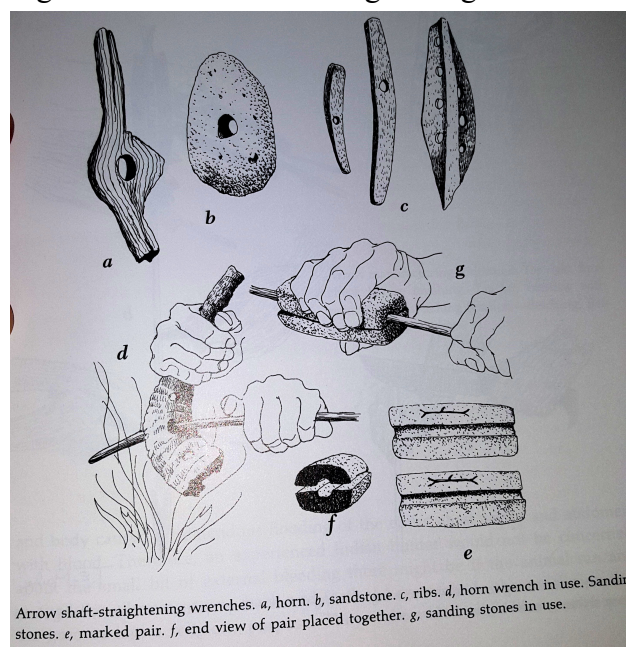


Fig. 5: Plains Cree self-bow<sup>15</sup>



***Shield (Naka-Has-Kwan)***

Fig. 6: Tools for arrow straightening<sup>16</sup>



<sup>15</sup> Bohr, R. (2014). Gifts from the thunder beings: Indigenous archery and European firearms in the Northern Plains and Central Subarctic, 1670-1870. *University of Nebraska Press*, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians. *Marlowe & Company*, 419

"...a shield struck at an angle was tough enough to deflect lances, arrows, or even a smoothbore ball at mid-range."<sup>17</sup>

The Cree name for the shield is Naka-Has-Kwan, which literally translates to arrow stopper. The shield was not only a defensive tool but also a statement piece that held immense significance as a spiritual instrument for ceremonies and warfare. It was no different in its importance than that of the English wearing the cross on their chest during battle. The war shield for the Indigenous warrior and how it was decorated was a reflection of their dreams, their path in life, and how they saw themselves to their enemy. The artwork in that time was quite basic and not like Native artwork of today. Simple symbols such as a lightning bolt could indicate speed, a bison could indicate power, and a wolf could indicate prowess or connection to family. Different coloured paints were used for the surface drawings and anything from feathers, leathers and furs to bones, scalps and even stuffed animals were attached to it, each of which had different meanings to the individual carrying it.

There were several different shields used on the Plains, some of which were for ceremonial practices only, but only two kinds were used during war. The first named simply the War Shield and the other was a smaller version called the Miniature War Shield which was mostly used while on horseback or when journeying over long distances. "Prior to the arrival of the horse, Plains war shields were quite large -- often being three feet or more in diameter. These were much too cumbersome for mounted men, though, and so the size was reduced until the average war shield measured only eighteen inches in diameter."<sup>18</sup> They were made almost entirely out of buffalo hide. Specifically the hide from the back of the neck or hump as this was the thickest part. There are some accounts of using willow hoops as a frame but these were less common and added unnecessary weight. The creation of a single Plains shield for war could take several days due to the shrinking/thickening process. Warriors began by digging a pit approximately two feet deep and two feet wide. Using the dirt that was dug up, a mound was made and would be used later in the creation process. The pit was then filled with round stones, typically larger than a softball. These stones are called Grandfather Rocks as they represent the ancestors. A fire is then lit over the Grandfathers to heat the stones to red hot temperatures. An alternate way to do this is to heat up the Grandfathers in another fire and then place the red hot stones in the empty pit. Once at this stage, the large sheet of hide is stretched over the hole. Half of it is secured to the ground by wooden pegs. A flap is opened and water is then poured on the stones to create steam. Quickly, the remainder of the hide is pegged down to seal the pit. The hide then becomes very pliable and while at this state, it is removed and quickly placed over the mound made earlier and pegged down tightly. This creates the convex or concave shape of the shield. The hide would remain there until dry. Once dry, the shrinking or thickening process begins which is when the shield shaped hide is pegged over a small fire (not too hot) within the original pit. This is where the process could take several days. A shield was rarely a single piece of hide though. There were typically several layers of hide to

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<sup>17</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). *The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians. Marlowe & Company*, 490

<sup>18</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). *The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians. Marlowe & Company*, 507



make it stronger. "It was layer and layer and layer. Think of laminated wood, same thing we would do with the rawhide. So you'd have the rawhide going one way, and then the other way, and the other way...So when something would hit, you wouldn't feel the shock through your arm. And sometimes if we had other [animal] hides, we'd actually laminate that in between to absorb shock. You could take all those other piece and use it as strapping."<sup>19</sup> Rawhide or buckskin was then used as a type of sling or hand loop and was attached to the shield. The larger shields were typically carried on the back and the smaller ones were carried either on the non-dominant arm or on the side of the horse.

There were two different styles of shields, convex and concave. The latter being the more commonly used by the Plains-Cree. The concave was considered to be the superior of the two, hence why it was more common. Fig. 7 illustrates the advantages of the concave over the convex shield for deflecting arrows. The training process to become proficient with the shield was a painful one but necessary to be successful in combat. The trainee would simply run or ride while others would fire blunted arrows at them. They would be struck several times and after some pauses, the process would continue or restart until the warrior became familiar, comfortable and proficient with their shield and how to block and redirect arrows. "All Indians were thus trained"<sup>20</sup>

Fig. 7: Convex vs. Concave shields<sup>21</sup>

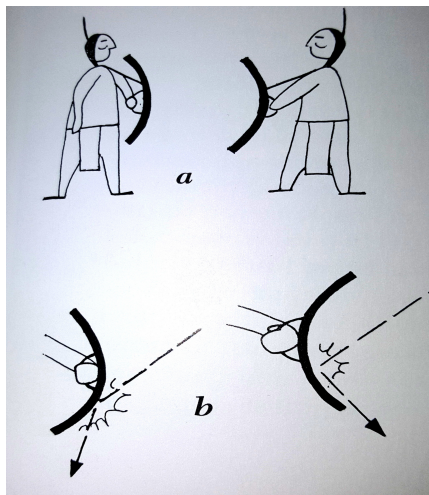


Fig. 8: Example of a Plains War Shield<sup>22</sup>



Although there are some teachings regarding the Naka-Has-Kwan in Okichitaw, it is rarely practiced in the martial art system due to the difficulty procuring the shields. Many of the defensive movements practiced in Okichitaw directly reflect the use of a shield. The intent is to manufacture these using traditional construction methods while also using modern methods to ensure a strong and reliable defensive tool for stage combat.

**Lance (Chika-Kwan) - See diagram in Components of a Plains Lance**

<sup>19</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

<sup>20</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians. *Marlowe & Company*, 498

<sup>21</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians. *Marlowe & Company*, 505

<sup>22</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018). *Pics and more...* [email].

The bow and arrow was the primary weapon one would gain proficiency in. The next would be the lance, or Chika-Kwan in Cree. In Okichitaw, the lance is not trained with as much because it needs a lot of space to wield. Only when there are smaller classes do students get to train with these long instruments. However, there are many offensive and counter movements designed specifically with the use of a lance. Unlike the other weapons in Okichitaw, it is the weapon that requires the least amount of training for use in combat.

The staff was typically made of oak, ash, hickory and sometimes white elm. "Lance staves were cut in late winter when the sap was down. The wood cut in this season would not split while drying...Shafts were then straightened by greasing them with fat and heating them over a fire. The final shaping was done with a knife"<sup>23</sup> The length of the foot-lance, the lance pre-horse era, was anywhere from 6 to 8 feet long. Once horses were introduced on the battlefield, the lances became significantly longer, anywhere from 8 to 10 feet in length. The shaft was generally around the same height as the warrior with the lance point going beyond that. "...lance heads could be up to thirty inches long by one inch wide (75cm by 2.5cm)..."<sup>24</sup> Older style lance heads were made of either a simple sharpened staff tip, a stone or sharpened bone that was slotted into the end of the shaft then tightly tied with sinew or rawhide strips. With the emergence of metals and trade options, the blades changed. There were three styles of metal heads that were primarily used by the Plains-Cree, all of which were double edged. The first was known as a Buffalo style lance head. This was simply a long piece of metal that was hammered, shaped and sharpened on both sides. (see Fig. 8) The second and most common during the trading era was known as the Assiniboine Blade. The main difference was that this was a thicker, stronger and a bevelled blade. (see Fig. 9) Lastly, and least common of the three used by the Plains-Cree was the Tenton Sioux blade. This blade was quite unique in appearance and was prominent in a lot of art work. (see Fig. 1) It was long and slender yet still bevelled like the Assiniboine blade. It had a triangular cut with slots cut into the blade. No literature could be found during the time of this paper as to the reason for the slots. When asked, Lepine simply said "well they cut like hell. [It's possible] they would tie a bit of sinew on the side...and that's how they had the feathers hanging out. So it was more of a flag than anything."<sup>25</sup> This style of blade could also be seen in artwork featuring Gunstock War Clubs. (see Figs 20 and 21)

It is considered a reach weapon and because of this it has many advantages when facing foes using shorter weapons. However, a large disadvantage would be that one would rarely be able to use this weapon in conjunction with another. Even with one handed lance tactics, the other hand was usually very much engaged and used to help control and set up the next attack. In battle, the lance was rarely thrown from a distance like a javelin. If throwing was the intention of the warrior, they would typically do it from a much closer range so that the intended target had less time to react. However, throwing of the Chika-Kwan was still practiced. There are many different single and double handed

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<sup>23</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). *The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians*. Marlowe & Company, 444.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, C. F. (2008). *Native American weapons*. University of Oklahoma Press, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

movements with the lance. From above the head or to one's side and even having the butt end tucked under the arm pit for more stability with one handed use. Depending on the situation, the lance could be held in either pronation or supination when wielded one handed. Two handed grips include both alternate and boxer style. Thrusts and cuts were both used depending on the situation. Controlled swings and chopping motions were also used, both of which utilized full force and the entire length of the weapon.

For modern training, the lance is relatively inexpensive to make. A long, 5 to 6 foot dowel can be easily acquired from a hardware store. The lighter ones work exceptionally well. However, some Okichitaw movements require rolling over the staff itself which could break it if done as it is fully intended. Thus, having spares on hand would be optimal. Cold Steel makes training spear heads out of Santoprene. They weigh less than 8 ounces and are approximately 17 inches from end to end. (see Fig. 11) Cutting off the ball and simply rounding the tip would be suggested for a more realistic spear head on stage. They can also be painted for added realism. Even though they hold similarities to the Tenton blade, they are not very historically accurate, but one must use what is available.

Fig. 8: Buffalo Lance Head<sup>26</sup>

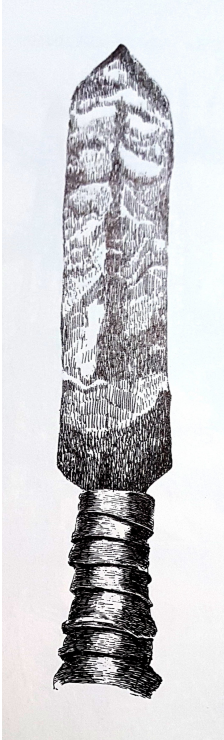


Fig. 9: Assiniboine Head<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 10: Tenton Sioux Head<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 11: Training Spearhead by Cold Steel<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). *The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians*. Marlowe & Company, 448.

<sup>27</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018). *Pics and more....* [email].

<sup>28</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018). *Pics and more....* [email].

<sup>29</sup> Khudayar, A. (2003, March 18). *Camouflage Military Surplus | Canadian Army Apparel & Tactical Gear*. Retrieved from <https://www.camouflage.ca/>



**Knife (Mokimahn) - See diagram in Components of the Knife**

From time immemorial, knives or cutting tools have been prominent in every single culture. They were used on a daily basis around the community from cutting and shaping wood to skinning game and even cutting your own hair. They were also the most common weapon on the battlefield. The way of creating these from region to region varied slightly yet the outcomes were all extremely similar. Prior to European contact the Plains-Cree fashioned their Mokimahn, Cree for knife, in a not so dissimilar way than any other tribe in North America. Using bones or antlers sharpened on two sides with sandstone was quite common and very dependable. Stone blades were created through the process of flint-knapping. The grips were wrapped with leather, sinew and/or rawhide. Sometimes wood inlays were added to help strengthen to the grip. With the introduction of steel knives by Europeans through the trade movement of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), their previous blades were quickly being phased out for these vastly superior implements. All kinds of blades poured into the Plains by Europeans and later American made blades were becoming popular too. Although Indigenous tribes would use any kind of blade they could get, the Plains-Cree favoured a particular kind of blade. It was known as the Beaver Tail Dagger from the early 1800's. (see Fig. 12)

The Beaver Tail dagger, also known as the Plains dagger, was a very unique looking blade and was almost exclusively used by Plains warriors. It was a double edged knife that was sharp on both sides all the way to the handle. It was a single piece of steel with a wooden handle fastened to it. The blade length itself was anywhere from 6 to 12 inches where the average was 8 inches, and the width was typically around 2 inches and seen as wide as 3 inches. It had significant weight, averaging 1 pound. As Lepine said, " It's significant, it's a chopper."<sup>30</sup> Due to the weight of these daggers, both cuts and thrusts were highly effective methods of defeating an enemy. From a very young age, the art of knife throwing was practiced for both accuracy and effectiveness in battle. The downside to this was that once the knife was thrown, the warrior was potentially left without a weapon. Knife throwing was used only if they were sure to make it the most lethal possible. They were generally accompanied by a leather sheath what was fastened to a belt or sash around the waist. Smaller knives could be seen tied to the ankle or across the chest. These were typically worn in one of three standard ways, "...cross-draw, back-draw or side-draw. Cross-draw, say if I'm right handed, I'd cross my lower belt and go for my left. And the most popular was the back draw though."<sup>31</sup> The reason back-draw was the preferred method was because the warrior would seldom ever be on their back during any

<sup>30</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

<sup>31</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

type of raid or sneak attack. They would be crouched, standing or on their bellies where quietly reaching toward the back was done with relative ease. A warrior would practice drawing their weapon constantly to become proficient.

Fig. 12: Beaver Tail Dagger and Beaded Sheath<sup>32</sup>



Like many different disciplines, Okichitaw uses a series of practical knife movements which target vital organs and arteries. Ten for each hand which includes downward and upward diagonal slashes, right to left and vice versa horizontal cuts while finishing off with thrusts to the neck or face. These can be done using two primary grips. The first being the standard grip, which is when the blade comes out of the fist at the thumb and index finger when holding the handle. The second is reverse grip or *Ice Pick* as it is commonly referred to. This is where, when holding the handle, the blade comes out from the fist at the pinky finger. Not only were Plains daggers used to cut and thrust, they were also used to deflect and block oncoming attacks.

Knife movements can be relatively inexpensive to train with. Any dulled knife, even wood pieces can be used for training. The Peace Keeper training knives by Cold Steel are a fantastic and relatively inexpensive option. (see Fig. 13) Like the spear head, they're made out of Santoprene. They weigh approximately 3 ounces and the blade itself is 4.5 inches long. Once again, not nearly culturally accurate but it is one of the closest and affordable options. They can be easily painted for added realism for the stage. Creating training Beaver Tail daggers out of 1/4 inch thick aluminium would be a better and more historically accurate option but would take the proper equipment and be more expensive

Fig. 13: Training Knife (peace keeper) by Cold Steel<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, C. F. (2008). Native American weapons. *University of Oklahoma Press*, 53.

<sup>33</sup> Khudayar, A. (2003, March 18). Camouflage Military Surplus | Canadian Army Apparel & Tactical Gear. Retrieved from <https://www.camouflage.ca/>



**Tomahawk (Chi-Kuna-Kinis) - See diagram in Components of a Tomahawk**

The Cree word Chi-Kuna-Kinis "was an old term even before metal came around, meaning a club that cuts."<sup>34</sup> The word tomahawk is derived from the Algonquin word tamahaac, pronounced Tommy-yuck. With the possible exception of the bow and arrow, the tomahawk is arguably the most synonymous with Indigenous weaponry. Unlike the Mokimahn and its evolution from stone and bone to steel, the tomahawk was specifically introduced upon the arrival of metal by Europeans. Nothing really compared to the thinness and strength of these steel implements. Prior to their arrival, they were simply clubs that could do some cutting, as mentioned in the quote above. By the late 17th and early 18th centuries tomahawk heads were one of many steel tools that were commonly traded to Indigenous peoples. Two that were popular amongst the Plains-Cree were the Frontier cut, which had no type of hammer on the back end, and the Pipe tomahawk. Seen in figures 14 and 15.

Fig. 14: Frontier cut Tomahawk<sup>35</sup>



Fig. 15: Pipe tomahawk<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

<sup>35</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018). *Pics and more...* [email].

<sup>36</sup> Safenames Ltd. (1995, March 19). Historical Memorabilia. Retrieved from <http://historical.ha.com/>



The pipe tomahawk either had a solid pipe bowl, which was great for impact, or a hollowed out bowl. In the latter case, the shaft of the tomahawk would also have a hole running through the length of it and the entire tomahawk became a pipe. Since its introduction to Indigenous peoples around the mid 18th century, the pipe tomahawk went from a practical weapon during warfare to a more spiritual and ceremonial one. The frontier cut head was the preferred tomahawk during battle. The Europeans had relatively short handles attached to their tomahawk heads which the Plains peoples replaced with longer shafts so that they could easily use two handed techniques. They were made of wood that had very little flexibility. The length of a Chi-Kuna-Kinis was anywhere from 19.5 to 24 inches with the average being around 20 to 22 inches. They weighed "anywhere from 1.7 to 2.1 pounds, the real heavy ones."<sup>37</sup> There are two ways of holding the tomahawk if it wasn't being carried in a belt or sash. There was the *carrying position* which is where the hand is near the head of the weapon to better control where the blade was. This was especially effective when running. The second is the *ready position*. This is where the hand is near the butt end of the shaft. This is where the hand is when a warrior intends to use the weapon. There were different ways to attack with this weapon using one or both hands. A warrior could cut using both the leading and following edges, slash, chop and lance or stab. The throwing of the tomahawk was a highly effective combat method. Like the knife, there are pros and cons to releasing your weapon but doing so with the Chi-Kuna-Kinis was extremely lethal. George Catlin, an author in the mid to late 19th century said "Plains warriors could throw a tomahawk and embed it in a person or other object with exceptional skill"<sup>38</sup> Countless hours of practice went in to gain proficiency and mastery of this throwing art.

Like the Mokimahn, there are a series of tomahawk movements practiced in Okichitaw based on the actual movements used by the Plains-Cree. The twenty movements include downward and upward diagonal slashes, right to left and vice versa horizontal cuts using

<sup>37</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

<sup>38</sup> Mails, T. E. (2002). The mystic warriors of the Plains: The culture, arts, crafts and religion of the Plains Indians. *Marlowe & Company*, 471.

the leading and following edges. There are also chops and a lance or stab. "In Okichitaw, one is trained to hit, hook, block and trap any individual attack including their weapon. Tactical defensive and offensive movements using the tomahawk may include parrying, blocking, locking the blade and sweeping as well as fierce attacks,"<sup>39</sup>

To train with tomahawks can be expensive depending on what one trains with. Cold Steel makes training trench tomahawks which are great but have their flaws. (see Fig. 16) They are made of Santoprene rubber and are just under 20 inches in length. They are very balanced which is nice but not very accurate as a true tomahawk is very head heavy. Also, because of the material it is made from, they tend to bounce off one another, which makes a lot of the traps and blocks used in Okichitaw quite challenging. In stage combat, the use of casting would help correct this but not entirely. Cold Steel and other companies make plain Frontier cut tomahawks with a straight wooden handle. These come in at 22 inches and weigh approximately 1.5 pounds which are more historically accurate. These would need to be dulled as they come with a sharp edge to it. A con to these would be that the heads are not secured to the handle. As of right now there are no perfect scenarios when it comes to the perfect training tomahawk for stage combat but the options are not terrible.

Fig. 16: Training Tomahawk (trench) by Cold Steel<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 17: Tomahawk by Cold Steel<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Lepine, G. (2016, September 19). Okichitaw Indigenous Combat Arts. Retrieved from <http://www.okichitaw.com/>

<sup>40</sup> Khudayar, A. (2003, March 18). Camouflage Military Surplus | Canadian Army Apparel & Tactical Gear. Retrieved from <https://www.camouflage.ca/>

<sup>41</sup> Khudayar, A. (2003, March 18). Camouflage Military Surplus | Canadian Army Apparel & Tactical Gear. Retrieved from <https://www.camouflage.ca/>





**Gunstock War Club (Notini-Towin-Mistik) - See diagram in Components of a Gunstock War Club**

Whether they were raiding other villages and settlements or going to war, every Indigenous warrior would carry some form of club. They were fashioned in a multitude of different ways. Anything from animal leg bone clubs, buffalo horn headed clubs, stone headed clubs and the most common of all of them, the ball headed war club. They were all quite heavy and designed to bludgeon an enemy which made them quite deadly. One form of club that is very seldom written about was the very unique Notini-Towin-Mistik, or Gunstock War Club in English. They were called this because they were carved in the form of a European gunstock. Out of all the weapons that are applied to the Indigenous arsenal, this two handed weapon was the only one where its sole intention was to be used for warfare. It was specifically designed to batter and disable another person. This was the preferred club of the Plains-Cree. "During the era of the musket, the inspiration and design of the Notini-Towin-Mistik most certainly came from warriors who observed the effective physical impact power of a spent musket being wielded by the barrel and swung at an adversary in hand-to-hand confrontations, providing devastating results when it hit someone."<sup>42</sup> It was during the second half the sixteenth century when Indigenous warriors began fashioning this weapon.

They were carved from a variety of different hard woods such as maple, ash, hickory, birch and hornbeam. "You want a wood that's solid enough that could take a thump."<sup>43</sup> They could weigh anywhere from 2 to 3 pounds. The size ranged anywhere from 2 to 3 feet in length and up to 6.5 inches at their widest point. The length was dependant on a couple factors. The main one being the region they lived and fought in. Gunstocks were on the longer side for people in the Plains, whereas Woodland tribes would have shorter ones because of the difficulty wielding long weapons between trees. An impaling blade or spike called *Sukiyikun* in Cree was usually affixed to the top part of the outer elbow of the weapon. This was generally a standard knife blade with an average length around 6 inches. Broken spear heads were a common addition as well. There are many historic paintings of warriors holding Gunstock War Clubs with Tenton spear heads as the spike. (see Fig. 20 and 21) As many as three spikes were also seen attached to the clubs. (see Fig. 19) Brass-headed tacks, engravings and paint were the most common ways of

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<sup>42</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

<sup>43</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

dressing this weapon. The Notini-Towin-Mistik that was intended to be used in battle was usually designed and crafted by the individual themselves. "Club's gotta be designed by you, for you, used by you."<sup>44</sup> Not only was the Gunstock a lethal weapon but it had a visual statement, indicating that the possibility of a firearm was being possessed by that individual, especially when coupled with a lance.

The Notini-Towin-Mistik also had a *carrying* and *ready* position and was held in a similar manner to the Chi-Kuna-Kinis. In the carrying position, the hand would be found gripping near the spike above the handle. Unlike the tomahawk, the ready position for the Gunstock is at the top of the handle, farthest away to the butt end. This way the weight will not drag the end toward the ground and the warrior has room on the handle for their second hand. They were also slung over the shoulder when its use was not immediate. When slung, the hoof would be towards the ground which was the opposite to that of a slung musket. When carried this way the warrior could use the cross-draw, as mentioned in the Mokimahn section, to quickly grab the club for battle. This weapon was generally wielded with both hands to achieve the most amount of damage. "You could cut, throw, crush, break, and snap bones with the Gunstock. You can't do that with any other weapon. This does everything."<sup>45</sup> There are four areas of this club a skilled warrior can strike with: The Face, the Spike, the Leading and Following edges. Each option for impact could deliver a devastating blow. However, it was uncommon to strike with the following edge if the Gunstock had a spike. Even a skilled warrior had to be mindful of the spike on their club as they could injure themselves. Generally only two to three Gunstock movements were ever utilised in any single engagement during combat as the momentum forward would decrease the distance to a point where the club could not be swung and hand to hand combat ensued. When defending, the face and the Curve/inner elbow are utilized most often. Typically there would be one single defensive action followed by an attack. Like the Chika-Kwan, the warrior wielding a full sized Notini-Towin-Mistik would be limited to only using this weapon instead of doubling up on weapons such as Mokimahn and Chi-Kuna-Kinis. Because of the spike, throwing the Gunstock was an extremely effective tactic. With the weight of the club, it takes a lot less effort for it to really sink into an adversary. It was uncommon to use the Notini-Towin-Mistik while on horseback as its intended to be used with both hands.

There are 33 offensive Gunstock movements in Okichitaw which quickly increase in lethality. Even blocks are considered offensive movements as they tend to either disarm the opponent, break their weapon or simply create a large line of attack. There are impact strikes, crushing blows followed by impaling with the Sukiyikun. It begins with a unique paddling technique from either side. This is a horizontal head strike that begins by swinging with the leading edge towards the opponent and right before contact is made, the hands rotate so that the face of the club makes contact with the head and skips over. The remainder of the movements alternate from striking with the leading edge to cutting or impaling with the spike. The finish outs after the initial 33 movements incorporate full body rotations to gather a tremendous amount of momentum ending with a deadly blow. The use of the Notini-Towin-Mistik is very circular as it is a heavy weapon and momentum leads to more devastating impact. "Out of all of the previously mentioned

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<sup>44</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

<sup>45</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018, December 11). Personal Interview.

weapons, the Gunstock War Club continues to be the primary and most consistent weapon of Okichitaw and being such; all hand techniques of Okichitaw are based on the hand positioning and attack applications of this specific weapon."<sup>46</sup>

This has the potential of being the most expensive of all the training weapons mentioned. Once again, Cold Steel manufactures a training Gunstock that is pretty accurate. (see Fig. 18) It is made out of polypropylene and is 29.5 inches in length and under 1.5 pounds. However, it has a small 3 inch triangular steel blade on it that can not be removed. It comes with a removable sheath tied around the inner elbow. This is definitely not ideal for stage combat as the blade is quite sharp and the sheath could easily untie or break in action, leading to an exposed blade. The less expensive option but very time consuming is to fashion one out of wood. Cutting some trainer Gunstocks out of some 2x8" hardwood boards would be optimal. A couple of inches of length could be added and there would be no blade to worry about, which adds to the safety of the weapon.

Fig. 18: Training Gunstock War Club by Cold Steel<sup>47</sup>



One can see by looking into the history and culture of Plains-Cree warriors and their weaponry from the 15th to 18th centuries that they had the ability to be quite effective and lethal. From stone to steel that took time a patience to acquire, create and to master before heading into battle. Thanks in part to some dedicated individuals, namely George J. Lepine, the combat tactics and techniques have a renewed life today within Okichitaw. One or all of the Chika-Kwan, Mokimahn, Chi-Kuna-Kinis and the Notini-Towin-Mistik can be created or purchased to train with. And with some time, Okichitaw could and hopefully will have a name in the stage and screen combat community.

Fig. 19: Spotted Eagle with 3 Spiked Gunstock War Club<sup>48</sup>

Fig. 20: George J. Lepine with Notini-Towin-Mistik<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Lepine, G. (2016, September 19). Okichitaw Indigenous Combat Arts. Retrieved from <http://www.okichitaw.com/>

<sup>47</sup> Khudayar, A. (2003, March 18). Camouflage Military Surplus | Canadian Army Apparel & Tactical Gear. Retrieved from <https://www.camouflage.ca/>

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, C. F. (2008). Native American weapons. *University of Oklahoma Press*, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018). *Pics and more....* [email].



Fig. 20: Gunstock with Tenton Sioux Spike<sup>50</sup>



Fig. 21: Gunstock with Tenton Sioux Spike<sup>51</sup>



<sup>50</sup> Taylor, C. F. (2008). Native American weapons. *University of Oklahoma Press*, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Lepine, G. J. (2018). *Pics and more....* [email].

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