

Iti Fabussa

Keeping old man winter at bay the Choctaw way

In the Spring of 2011, Iti Fabvssa published an article about traditional Choctaw houses. One thing that article lacked was a good image of what these structures actually looked like from the inside. This fall, the Historic Preservation Department has created a drawing that shows what the interior of a Choctaw winter home would have looked like about 300 years ago.

As seen in this image, Choctaw winter houses were designed with warmth in mind. Heated by a central fire, some winter houses had holes for the smoke to escape, others apparently did not. To prevent the wind from getting inside, the doorway curved around part of the outside of the house and was closed with a wooden door, hinged with pieces of rawhide.

The walls were thick, and covered with an adobe-like

plaster. In all likelihood, the walls were decorated with dyed river cane mats and painted robes that were hung up when they were not being used elsewhere. River cane platforms covered in softly tanned hides lined the house's interior walls. During the day, they served as couches; at night, they were beds. Food was stored under these beds, sometimes coated in clay to help it preserve longer. River cane trunks lining the walls held clothing and other possessions.

Deer hides waiting to be tanned would have hung from the rafters to absorb some of the smoke coming from the fire. Dried roots, vegetables, and jerky would have also been hung up, handy for the cooks. Warriors' weapons would have been placed where they could be picked up on an instant's notice. The fireplace, perhaps lined with poured clay, would have had been surrounded by an assortment of Choctaw-made bowls and jars, some filled with warm food waiting for a hungry guest.

With cold weather raging outside, a Choctaw winter home was a pretty cozy place.



Illustration by Ruby Bolding

A Choctaw winter house did not always have an interior opening in the top allowing the smoke to escape, thereby keeping all the much-needed heat inside creating a dutch oven effect. Squash and other vegetables were kept under sleeping quarters for winter consumption. The entryway was small to keep out drafts and created sloping downward since the house was partially built under the ground.