

Supplemental Material for “Carrying Fire the Pikunii Way”

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Supplement I.

Script for the Video “Carrying Fire the Pikunii Way”

Interviewer: Carrying Fire the Pikunii Way

The Pikunii people, also called the Blackfeet, have lived in the Northern Great Plains of the United States for hundreds and hundreds of years.

In the time before railroads, before European-American settlement, and before Reservations, they were a migratory people. Every year, they moved from one place to another so they could hunt the buffalo and harvest other foods and medicines.

As the Pikunii traveled, they took fire with them. How did they do that, and why?

Listen to the stories of Marvin Weatherwax, an elder of the Pikunii people. He will explain about the Pikunii way to carry fire throughout the year, as the people followed the buffalo.

Weatherwax: Fire is very important to us in many areas. One of the most important areas was conservation. The Pikunii people were very, very conscious of making sure that, when they left an area, it was clean and it was going to come back just the way they found it. So when they left camp, they would burn the area, so that the things they left there was all burned. Everything was burned, all the grounds and all, and what that did was it left it to renew. It would grow back and renew.

Fire was very important in another aspect. That was how they built their pharmacies. After a fire, the first thing that comes up is the “weeds.” And many of them are the medicines that we use for various ailments and the things that we need.

And we'll make a fire, deliberately burn an area where we know that certain plants are. It'll burn them down and then they'll grow back.

Interviewer: Why was it important to carry fire from one camp to the next?

Weatherwax: When we talk about the longevity and the continuity of our people, the fire played a very important part in that. When we moved from one camp to the other, it was very important that they took fire from the main fire. They took some of that and brought it to the next camp and started that fire with it. In this sense, we had the same fire that went on and on and on.

In doing so, they had to have some way to transport it because sometimes the camps were 20, 30, 40 miles apart. And they had to have a way to transport that flame from THAT fire to the new fire. It would be very easy to go and start a new fire, just to send someone to start a new fire, but the meaning, the importance of taking the fire from one camp to the other, the continuity, was very important. It was a very spiritual meaning,

The vessel that they used was very important, and that was the fire carrier. This is a fire carrier here, that is a completed one and this is the outer covering, which is mud or clay. That goes on the outside, then the covering, which is made out of wood or stone, and that covers the top of it.

Sometimes they carried two or three of them, depending on how far they were going to travel. And they'd begin with one of them that had fire in it. And then if they got to the point where this was getting hot down here on the end, they would know it's coming to the end of this, and then they would change, stop and take that, and put that fire into another one, and then they would start out again.

A slit on the sides and down on the bottom:
Not only ventilation, to get air - oxygen in there, to keep it going.

But the bottom one was
to let you know that it was time to change it.
The ingenuity that was used in building these
was absolutely phenomenal.
We'll go through one here that's built.

This is the horn, and down on the bottom of here,
we have moss, and it was usually kind of damp,
and that was pushed all the way down to the bottom.

And then they would put the wood on top of it,
going in a round circle.
But they would have softwoods in the middle.
There's a flat stone here,
where they would put the original piece of coal on there.
And they used the softwoods
because the softwoods are easier to ignite.

So from the coal, the softwood would ignite,
and then outside of that was the hardwood,
right on the outside.
And then after this burned, then the hardwood would burn.

And the thing that is good about the hardwoods
is that the hardwoods,
such as the cottonwood or the aspen,
it does not go out.
It'll burn until there is no more wood.
But the heat from the softwood
is what would get the hardwood going,
because that was a little harder to get started burning.
But once that got going, it went on and on.

The moss was not only on the bottom,
it was also around the outer edge,
and this was to keep it from flaming.
It would not flame, it would just stay a coal.

And then the top part was the cover,
which was very important, a very important part of it.
It was a stone, and most of the time it was wrapped
with something that would burn away,
like a piece of rawhide, sometimes,
but it would be wet, soaked in water,

so that when it was put down on there,
it made a seal, it covered it up, and it was tied down.

The bottom inside of that would normally burn from the heat.
This would be very very hot.

Interviewer: How long do you think fire would last in a fire carrier?

Weatherwax: Really, it depended on how big the fire carrier was,
because that would depend on
what the length of the hardwood would be,
that you put in there.

Interviewer: Who carried fire for the people?

Weatherwax: There were special people that were chosen,
and it was normally the long distant runners,
because they ran not only to find out where the buffalo were,
but they ran to get new camps, to where the camp was.
They didn't walk, they literally ran,
sometimes for 40, 50 miles, nonstop.

The people that put it together were
someone that had done it for a long time,
and he would teach someone else to do it.
And just my sense –
I would think that the runners that carried it
were the ones, that it was –
the knowledge of how to make it was passed on to them.

In my readings and talking with people,
most all the tribes had their own way of continuing.
Even the Indians in Alaska.
They used the whale bones and did something similar to this
and they transported their fires the same way,
and for the same reasons.
So the continuity of the fire was important
amongst all the native people.
All of us are so conscious about carrying things on
and making sure that things are continued.

Interviewer: The Pikunii traveled hundreds of miles each year, carrying fire. This was
“the Cycle of the Buffalo.”

Weatherwax: It was right around the Choteau area - that's where our main camps always were. In the spring of the year, this is where the buffalo were.

Up here and down toward, right above the Great Falls area, there was usually a herd of female buffalo calving.

In this area down here by Great Falls, there's a pishkun down there now. They called it the Ulm Pishkun, and it was used primarily for the elders. What they would do is, some warriors would go down, and they would take part of a herd - not a real large part - and then they would run them off of that pishkun. They did it in the spring of the year before the cows gave birth.

Previous to us being on the Reservation, we traveled pretty much through the whole half of the state.

And they came around over by Shelby along the Marias River, and they hunted the Sweet Grass Hills, and they brought that back to Shelby, and then they camped there for awhile. And then they continued on over into Canada, by the Cypress Hills. Normally when they hit the Cypress Hills it was around July.

And then they came up from there toward Calgary. They turned down along the mountains. And then about this time of the year, they were probably right in this area along the mountains, right in the mountains by Pincher Creek, right above Pincher Creek. And then they would move down into the winter camp area.

Interviewer: Do the Pikunii still carry fire?

Weatherwax: What my grandfather told me about the fires: He was told probably about the middle of the 1800s was when they say the last fires went out. It was probably just previous to the buffalo being gone. And the reason for that was that they moved their camps to follow the buffalo. And then when the buffalo were gone,

then it was not necessary for them to move their camps anymore and follow the buffalo.

They could stay stationary,
and then they had to begin to depend on the wildlife that was there
or the cattle that the government was going to provide them...
the rations that the government was going to provide them.

That's when they all had to start living on reservations,
so that's when the fire ended.

Interviewer: Sharing knowledge about the Pikunii way

Weatherwax: One of my responsibilities in my life
is to pass on things that I have learned
from my grandparents and from the other elders.
Because I have finally become, I believe I've become an elder,
and I can pass this on.

Supplement II.

Constructing a Replica or Model of a Pikunii Fire Carrier

The instructions below explain how to make a useable fire carrier. If you would like to make a model of the fire carrier like the ones available at Blackfeet Community College or the Missoula Fire Sciences Laboratory, follow the instructions below, except for the following:

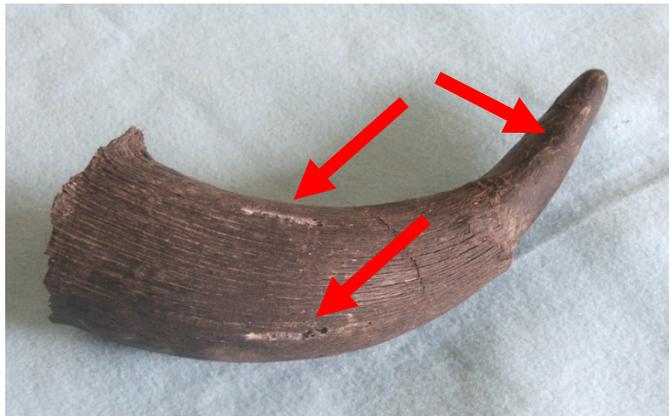
1. Use a complete buffalo horn, as below, and also a cross-section of a buffalo horn.
2. Cover the outside of the horn and cross-section with car-body putty or plastic clay instead of making the coating from soil and glue.
3. As you assemble the fire carrier and the cross section, attach everything using a glue gun.

Do not try to use a model fire carrier (made with glue and other synthetic materials) to actually carry live coals.

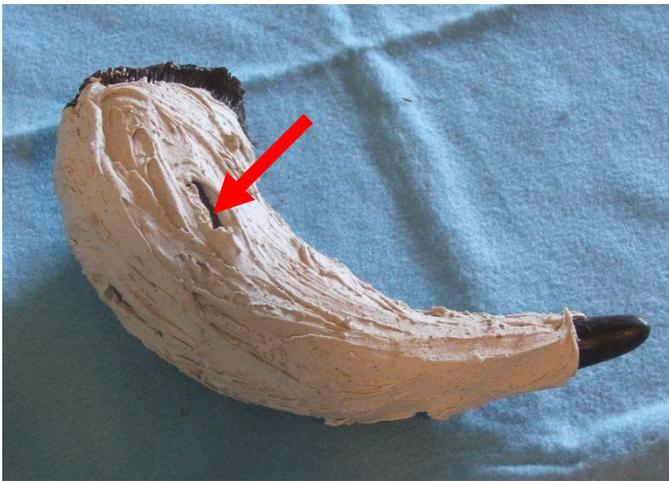
Materials for making a fire carrier are found in our surroundings:

- Large buffalo horn
- Sand and dirt
- Glue (made from the insides of the hooves of a horse)
- FUELS:
 - Wood—small branches of...
 - Softwoods:
 - Douglas-fir
 - Other fir species
 - Pine
 - Hardwoods:
 - Cottonwood
 - Aspen
 - Chokecherry
 - Sarvisberry (also called Saskatoon serviceberry)
 - Birch
 - Buffaloberry (used because they smell bad when they burn—a warning to the runner that the fuels are nearly all burned)
 - Willow (any species)
 - Moss
 - Sage leaves
 - Stone (one small, flat stone that will fit inside horn and hold the burning coals)
 - Rawhide piece about 10" square
- Block of wood large enough to cover opening of horn—or—piece of stone that is cone shaped. (Either can be shaped to cover the horn's opening.)
- Strip of leather or rawhide ¼" wide and 30-36" long

1. **Constructing the fire carrier:** Using a knife, drill, or other sharp object, cut 4 small openings in the buffalo horn about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up from the small end. Make the openings 1-2" long and $\frac{1}{8}$ " wide. Make additional openings at the narrow tip of the horn.



2. Mix sand, dirt, and glue. Knead into the consistency of dough.
3. Apply mixture to outside of horn in a layer about $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick. Make sure that you don't cover up the openings in the horn. Press down firmly to make sure that this insulating material has good contact with the horn and sticks well.



4. Let dry for about 3 days.
5. Fill the bottom of the horn with moss. Then line the inside of the horn with moss and sage leaves about $\frac{1}{2}$ " deep all the way to within $\frac{1}{2}$ " of the top, leaving enough room at the top for the cover to fit in tightly.
6. Place sticks in concentric circles inside the horn: The first row, just on the inside surface of the horn, should be hardwood. Put in more hardwood rows until about half of the horn's cross-section is filled.



7. Inside the hardwood sticks, add 1-2 rows of softwood sticks in rows until $\frac{3}{4}$ of the horn's cross-section is filled. Leave enough open area in the middle for the flat stone (see step 9).
8. More about the sticks:
 - In the outside row, reaching all the way to the bottom of the horn, place one stick of buffaloberry. This will give off a very distinct, unpleasant odor to let you know when the fuels in the carrier are almost burned out.
 - Put at least one cottonwood stick in each row of sticks. Cottonwood continues to burn and does not go out until it is completely burned up. This will help ensure that the fire carrier will stay lit.
9. Place a flat, round stone in the center and push it down as far as it will go. This will wedge the sticks in place and hold the live coal.
10. **Closing and sealing the fire carrier:** Get a block of wood or stone and cut it to the size of the opening of the horn. Carve it into a tapered or cone shape that will fit inside the horn. Leave enough space for the rawhide covering.

11. Cut the rawhide so it will wrap around the wood/stone cover.
12. Soak the rawhide in water for at least 15 minutes before using. This will make it expand and seal the opening of the horn tight. Wipe excess moisture off the cover before use.

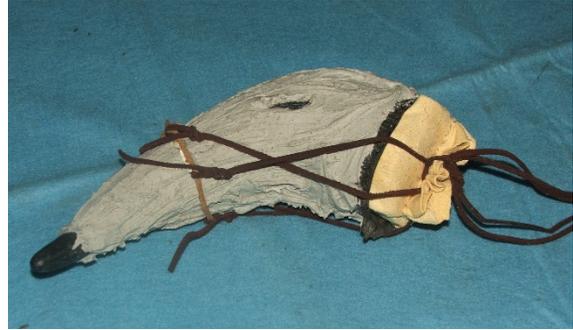


11. Cover the wood/stone with the damp rawhide and attach it to the cover with sinew. Make it tight. Make holes in the top of the rawhide cover about $\frac{1}{4}$ " long to hold the strips of leather that secure the cover.



12. Cut leather into 5 strips, each about 14" long. These will be used to secure the cover.
13. Tie ends of four leather strips onto the fifth piece, which goes around the horn.
14. Tie the 5th piece of leather around the horn, about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the way up from the bottom of the horn. Adjust the four loose strips so they are placed evenly around the horn.

15. Crisscross and lace the strips through the $\frac{1}{4}$ " cuts made in the rawhide that covers the carrier cover.



When you have all pieces completed and they fit together perfectly, the fire carrier is ready to use. Open it and place burning coals on the flat stone in the middle. Put several pieces of hardwood on top of the burning coals to keep them in place. Put the cover on and tie the straps tight.

Remember: