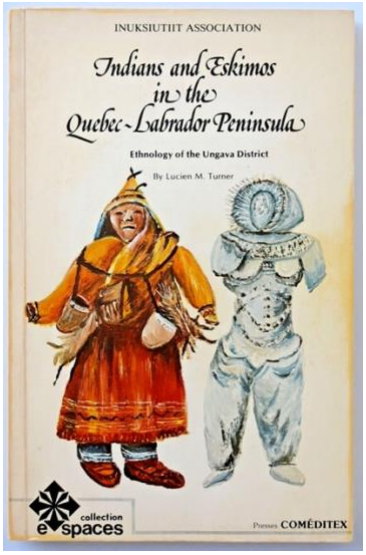
How to make an Innu utapanashkᵘ (toboggan)



From:
Lucien Turner. 1919 [1894]. Indians and Eskimos in the Quebec-Labrador Peninsula. Ethnology of the Ungava District, Hudson Bay Territory. Quebec: Presses Comeditex. pp.144-145.

For carrying loads over the snow all the Indians of this region use large sleds called ta-bas-kan, which is a word equivalent to the well-known name "toboggan." These sleds, as used among the Indians under consideration, differ very greatly in size according to the use for which they are designed.

The method of construction is as follows: a tree is selected as free from knots as possible and two boards of less than an inch in thickness are hewed or split from it. These boards are further dressed to the required thickness and width. The final operation consists in shaving them down with a "crooked knife" to little more than half an inch in thickness. One edge of each board is then straightened and the two edges placed together. The length is rarely more than 13 feet. The front end is steamed or heated in a kettle of hot water until the boards become flexible. The ends are turned up to the desired curve and then bent over at the end, where they are held in position by a transverse bar of wood. This bar is slightly concave on the side next the sled and gives the nose a curved shape. The curved portion of the front may rise as much as 18 inches above the surface over which the sled travels. At the place where the curve begins a second transverse bar is placed, and at a distance behind it a third, fourth, and fifth bars are fastened. Sometimes an addition bar is to be found on the upper side of the bottom. These bars are all fastened to the two bottom boards by means of thongs of parchment deerskin, and run through holes on the bottom boards. On the underside the thongs are let into places cut out between the two holes, so that the thongs will not be worn when passing over the snow. They are usually fastened in four places, one at each end of the bar and one on each side of the crevice between the edges of the two boards. From the nose of the first bar run a pair of very stout thongs or else twisted sinew, which are drawn tight enough to prevent the nose and curve from straightening out. From the end of the first bar to the last one on the heel of the sled is run a stout twisted thong under the end of each bar, which has a notch cut on the underside for the line to pass through. This line serves to strengthen the sides and prevent the two boards from slipping past each other when passing over inequalities of the ground.

At the ends of the first bar and connected with the side lines are two long stout thongs of twisted skin, often 25 feet long. These are used as traces, by which the sled is dragged. The shape of the bottom is often fashioned after all the remainder of the work has been done. The width of the nose is rarely more than 9 inches; at the first bar it is about 14 inches and as much as 18 inches between the first and second bars. From the widest part to the heel it gradually narrows to a width of 5 to 7 inches.

Two boards are used, as one of sufficient width could not be obtained from the forests of that region. Besides, a single board would certainly split, while two obviate this danger and render the sled less stiff. In passing over rough places the sled must bend to conform to inequalities or else it would break. In the construction of this vehicle the Indian displays much skill and a perfect knowledge of the requirements of the case. The load is placed so as to dispose the weight on that portion which will bear chiefly on the ground. The great length of the sled enables the person to guide it more readily.

When on a journey the younger women and the men drag it along. When the men return to the station to trade, they alone drag it. A small dog is sometimes hitched to it by a thong, but as the animal is so small and light, it affords but little assistance. The animal, however, would certainly wander off in search of game along the track, and by being hitched to the sled is kept within bounds.

All the household effects, consisting of tent, cooking utensils, clothing, and other articles are placed on the sled when the people are changing camp.