

LESSON 2: Tipi

Time 30 minutes

Trunk Resources

“How to Make a Tipi” game cards

Graphics

- #1 Wichita Indians Camp Meeting
- #2 Hummingbird’s Camp, Kiowa
- #3 Southern Cheyenne Tipis
- #4 Unidentified Group of Tipis
- #32 Tipi Interior
- #34 Types of Shelter
- #35 Painted Tipis

Worksheets

- #5 Matching symbols
- #10 Tipi pattern

Objects

- Tanned hide sample
- Rawhide sample
- Sinew sample
- Scraper

Teacher Preparation

Other materials needed: Scissors, crayons or markers, toothpicks, and hole punch.
Copy worksheet #10 on brown paper for each student.

Objectives

1. Students will identify materials used to make a tipi.
2. Students will compare their own homes to a tipi.

Historical background

The word tipi means “used to dwell in.” It comes from two Dakota words – ti, meaning “to dwell,” and pi, which means “used for.” Many of the Plains Indians lived in tipis, but some used them only when they were away from their permanent villages. Other types of housing include grass lodges, earth lodges, and bark houses. Because tipis were portable, they fit the Indians’ style of life. When the Indians moved, they took their homes with them. Putting up or taking down a tipi was women’s work, and they could do it very rapidly.

The tipi frame was made of poles. Poles were gathered in early spring. They were carefully selected as they needed to be tall, straight, and slender. Tipi poles were each eighteen to twenty five feet long, three to four inches thick at the bottom and tapered to

about two inches where the poles were crossed and tied. The women peeled the bark off the tree, making the pole smooth as possible. Because wood was scarce in the grasslands, the poles were also carried from place to place. Sometimes the Indians had to travel long distances to find new poles to replace the old ones.

The smoke flap poles were smaller with a sharpened butt to keep the poles from slipping. After the poles were prepared, they were seasoned for at least three weeks by setting up the frame without a cover and letting the poles dry in the sun and air. Well-made poles would stay rigid and not bend or curve. Women made tipis which remained their property. Two women usually worked together to set up the home. The cover was spread out on the ground inside up with the foundation poles positioned on top. Two poles were placed together with a third one on top, forming a cross. Many Plains tribes used the three-pole method; a few others used the four-pole foundation method.

One woman tied the three poles together at the cross, then raised the tripod. The pole that was placed on top when the foundation poles were positioned on the cover was the door pole and was located just to the left of the doorway as you entered the tipi. The other poles were put toward the back of the tipi at the north and south. The three poles locked into place to form a strong foundation. The tipi was not a true cone, but tilted which made the back shorter and steeper. The short, steep side formed a strong brace against the winds.

The order and placement of each pole in the frame was important. The last pole, called the lifting pole, had the cover attached to it. It was hoisted into place at the back of the tipi, opposite the doorway. The cover was unwrapped from the pole and brought around the sides meeting at the front. The left side was placed over the right and held in place with lacing pins. The lacing pins were pointed sticks made from chokecherry, ash, or dogwood.

The cover of a tipi was made of buffalo hides, usually of older buffalo that were killed in the early summer. These hides were thinner, easier to tan, and lighter to transport because the cows had shed their winter fur. An average tipi required twelve to sixteen hides.

The cover did not quite reach to the top of the poles so the ends could stick out. This hole also let out smoke from the fire that was built in a scooped-out pit, or hole, in the center of the tipi. The cover was also made so that it had large rectangular “wings” on each side of the smoke hole. A stake or forked branch was placed in front of the tipi. Long cords attached to the bottom of the smoke flaps were tied to the stake. The cords helped to keep the smoke flaps taut and helped to brace the tipi.

Next the women adjusted all the poles by pushing out against the cover from the inside. The cover was anchored by wooden pegs placed around the base. Each peg was about two feet long and one inch thick. During the summer months, the bottom of the cover was generally lifted off the ground several inches for better ventilation. In winter, it was pulled as close as possible to the ground. Dirt was often piled up over the cover’s edges to seal it tightly, and an extra lining of hides was added inside to make the tipi even warmer.

Various kinds of doors were used on tipis, differing in shape and decoration. A door might have been tanned hide or an old blanket attached to lacing pins above the doorway. Some doors could be skin stretched on two sticks or on an oval or round willow frame. Hides with hair left on shed water well and helped to keep the entrance dry.

Interior

The interior was sparsely furnished because everything needed to be quickly packed and moved. After the tipi was up, the tipi lining, or dew cloth, was added. The lining was tied to the poles about halfway up the side of the tipi. The bottom of the lining reached the ground where stones were used to anchor it in place. Furs were placed on the ground. Buffalo hides made good pallets or beds. Willow-rod fastened together with sinew and hung from a tripod served as a backrest. Parfleches were used to store food, clothing, and personal belongings.

The fireplace was the center of the home and everything was placed symmetrically around it. Furnishings and belongings were arranged to give a balanced and neat appearance to the tipi. The rear of the lodge opposite the door was a place of honor for guests. It was the least drafty spot and no one had to pass between there and the fire to go anywhere in the tipi. Religious and sacred objects were also stored at the back.

The lining, made of tanned hide, kept out drafts and dampness, and prevented rain from dripping off the poles. It gave increased ventilation, helping to clear out the smoke. The warm air rising inside the tipi drew in cold air from the outside, which came in under the cover and went up behind the lining, creating a perfect draft for the fire and taking the smoke out with it. A tipi was very dry even in damp, humid weather because the lining kept the dew from condensing inside, hence the name “dew cloth.” It is also called a “ghost screen” because the lining prevented the fire from casting shadows on the tipi. This ghost screen also provided privacy from neighbors and safety from an enemy who could aim at a shadow.

Linings were often decorated with very beautiful designs or beaded stripes, feathers, dyed hair, or tassels. Men sometimes painted the lining to record personal experiences. Personal triumphs of hunters or warriors or stories about tribal events could be illustrated on the lining. The lining added to the beauty of the tipi, made the home a special place and added comfort, privacy, and safety.

The tipi was a very practical house form well adapted to prairie life. The tipi was a temple as well as a home. The floor represented the earth, the walls represented the sky, and the poles represented the trails from earth to the spirit world – the links between man and the Great Spirit.

Source: Reginald Laubin and Gladys Laubin, *The Indian Tipi*.

Vocabulary

Environment – The circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded.

Nomadic – To move with purpose from place to place.

Parfleche – A leather container, often decorated, used for storage.

Rawhide – Hide that has not been processed but has been left to dry and become hard.

Sinew – Tendon found along the backbone of the buffalo and other animals, used for sewing thread.

Tanned hide – Hide that has been processed with a mixture of brains, fat, and water.

Tipi – A portable house made of tanned hides sewn together and stretched over a framework of poles.

Activities

1. Show students graphics #1 Wichita Indians Camp Meeting; #2 Hummingbird's Camp, Kiowa; #3 Southern Cheyenne tipis. Ask students to identify the type of house shown in all three pictures. (Tipi.) Ask students if they know who lived in tipis. (Indians/Native Americans.) Tell students that not all Indians lived in tipis. Many nomadic tribes (tribes that moved from place to place) used tipis because they were easy to move. However, numerous tribes did not travel as often and settled in villages. Some examples of other housing types are earth lodges, grass lodges, and bark houses. You may want to show students graphic #34 Types of Shelter to stress the point that not all Indians lived in tipis.
2. Have students compare their homes with a tipi.
 - a. Ask students if they know who built their homes? (Students may or may not know this.) Explain that Indian women were responsible for building the tipis.
 - b. Ask students how many rooms their homes have? Compare this with a tipi. Explain that tipis have only one room. Show students graphic #32 Tipi Interior. This would be a good time to compare items inside the homes. Talk about the fire, ask students the following questions: Why was the fire placed in the middle of the tipi? Where were the beds located: Did Indian children have their own room? Where did they eat? Have students compare the tipi interior with their own homes. Have students make a list of similarities and differences.
 - c. Ask students what their homes are made of? What are tipis made from? (Tanned hide and poles.) Show students the samples of tanned hide, rawhide, scraper and sinew. Talk about gathering the poles to make the frames, hunting buffalo and tanning the hides, and sewing hides together with sinew. Discuss with students how the Indians' environment affected housing, as well as other aspects of Native American life. How does the environment affect our housing needs?
3. As you talk about the materials used to make a tipi, you may also want to talk about the construction. Use the How to Make a Tipi game cards to show the tipi at various points of development.
4. Show students graphic #3 Southern Cheyenne Tipis and #35 Painted Tipis. Point out the decorated tipis on both of these graphics. Explain that Indians often

painted symbols on their tipis. These decorations were the property of the tipi owner and were seen as a form of protection. The designs were often geometric or represented religious beliefs, and they usually displayed figures the owner had seen in a dream. Actual life experiences, such as battles and hunts, also were painted on tipis. Bead and quill trimmings also were used to decorate tipis.

5. Make a model of a tipi.
 - a. Show students graphics #3 Southern Cheyenne Tipis and #35 Painted Tipis.
 - b. Each student should have a copy of worksheet #10 Tipi Pattern to cut out.
 - c. Allow students to draw an appropriate symbol or picture on their tipi covers. See examples of symbols in worksheet #5 Matching Symbols, and on graphics #3 and #35.
 - d. Students (or teacher) will punch holes in appropriate location.
 - e. Place toothpicks through the holes to hold the tipi together.

Extended Activities

1. Story starter exercise

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Graphics

- #1 Wichita Indians Camp Meeting
- #2 Hummingbird's Camp, Kiowa
- #3 Southern Cheyenne tipis
- #4 Unidentified group of tipis
- #32 Tipi interior
- #34 Types of shelter
- #35 Painted tipis.

Worksheet: #4 Tipi story starter

Teacher Preparation

Photocopy worksheet #4 for each student.

Activity

- a. On the story starter, have students write a short paragraph on whether or not they would want to live in a tipi and why. Or, what would it be like to live in a tipi.
- b. Display the student's stories on a bulletin board.

2. Tipi coloring sheet

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Worksheet: #18 Painted tipis.

Graphics

- #3 Southern Cheyenne tipis
- #35 Painted tipis

Teacher Resources

Photocopy worksheet #18 for each student. Assemble pencils, crayons, and/or markers.

Activity

- a. Have students complete worksheet #18. Remind them to use different colors to represent the designs on the tipis. Use graphics #3 and #35 of decorated tipis to help students be more realistic.

3. How to Make a Tipi game**Trunk Resources**

“How to Make a Tipi” game cards.

Teacher Preparation

Assemble paper, pencils, crayons, and/or markers.

Activity

- a. Have students arrange the laminated cards in correct order. The cards show the steps necessary to make a tipi.
- b. Have students draw the steps on a piece of paper in the correct order.