

## LESSON 3: Earth Lodge and Grass Lodge

**Time** 30 minutes

### Trunk Resources

#### Graphics

- #5 Wichita Grass lodge
- #6 Pawnee Earth lodge
- #7 Sac and Fox bark house
- #8 Summer house, Potawatomi
- #18 Wichita Grass lodge, drying rack
- #19 Wichita village scene
- #28 Kansa dog dance
- #34 Types of shelter

### Teacher Preparations

Assemble: One shoe box (either one for each student or possibly one per four children), glue, scissors, tape, construction paper, color crayons or markers, and raw materials such as grass, dirt and sticks (optional).

Review Lesson 2: Tipi

### Objectives

1. Students will compare and contrast Native American homes.
2. Students will identify reasons for location of homes.

### Historical background

#### *The Earth lodge*

The earth lodge was the home for the Pawnee Indians. Building an earth lodge was a tremendous undertaking. It required the cooperative efforts of the family and perhaps the entire village. The actual planning for the construction of the lodge began with acquiring the proper materials. The lodge was round, and built from trees, grass, and dirt.

The framework of a lodge consisted of sturdy poles—actually the trunks of small trees. Those forming the outer wall were set deep in the soil. Rafters, forming the roof, were lashed to these poles and were slanted inward and upward. In large lodges, an additional vertical supporting framework of poles was placed in the middle of the lodge to hold the rafters in position. More poles were added to fill in the frame and to strengthen the roof. Willow branches were laid over the rafters and against the walls; they were loosely thatched to hold them in place. Dried grass was laid over the willows, layers of sod were placed over the grass, and the entire lodge was then covered with dirt. When the building was completed, it blended into its surroundings like a low hill. In the

spring, grass would grow on the lodge, which gave it the appearance of a green mound on the prairie.

### *Interior*

A typical lodge would house thirty to fifty people, usually consisting of two related families. The lodge was divided in half, with one family on the north and the other on the south, while they shared the center area. The two families took turns with household chores such as cooking and cleaning. The fireplace was placed in the center of the lodge. A smoke hole was directly above the fire pit. The beds were placed around the perimeter of the lodge. Skin curtains hung at the head and foot of each bed, dividing it from neighboring beds.

The long east entryway was wide enough to keep the horses protected if the weather was too severe. Next to the entryway near the woodpiles was a working area for both families.

In the sacred area at the west was an earthen or wooden platform with a buffalo skull resting on it, and above it hung a long, skin-wrapped bundle containing their most sacred objects, including two specially bred ears of corn. Between the fireplace and the buffalo altar was a sacred spot believed to be invisible—the *wi-haru*, “the place where the wise words of those who have gone before us are resting.” (Weltfish, p.62) Rather than step over this place to pass from one side of the house to the other, everyone walked around the entire lodge by way of the east. When the heads of the household sat down to rest or when they entertained important guests, it was near the west that they sat, and no one passed in front of them.

### *The Grass lodge*

The grass lodge was the home of the Wichita Indians during the spring, summer, and early fall. During the late fall and winter, the Wichitas left their villages for extended buffalo hunts. They lived in tipis during this period.

The construction of the grass lodge involved two phases. One was preparation, which included selecting the site and gathering the materials. The other was the actual building. Building a grass lodge required considerable planning because it took time to collect the materials. These lodges were built to accommodate extended families from ten to twelve people. Everyone helped collect the materials, but women assumed most of the responsibility for building the lodge. The lodge was considered the property of the oldest female occupying it.

After the site was chosen, a circle was marked on the ground to show the dimensions of the lodge. Next, poles were driven into the ground in a circle and then bent together to form a cone-like top. Other poles were lashed to this framework horizontally.

Bundles of tall prairie grass were tied to this frame. Grass was added at the bottom and held in place by putting a horizontal rod on top of the grass. The rod was tied to the internal webbing to secure the grass in place. A special tool, made from a bison scapula or rib and called a grassing needle, was used to thread the strips of rawhide or bark through the grass. One person was needed inside and one person outside to pass the needle back and forth through the grass.

On top of the house was a grass spire surrounded by the tips of four poles pointing north, south, east, and west. This spire was very important to the Wichita Indians. It pointed to Man-Never-Known-on-Earth (Kinnekasus), who was the creator in the Wichita religion. The main lodge entrance opened to the east; another doorway faced west. The early traditions of the Wichitas suggest that in addition to the east and west doors, north and south openings were only used for certain ceremonies, not for everyday use. The doors were not attached to the lodge, but moved aside when entering. The door could be made of grass on a rod framework, or it could have been a door of hide that could be rolled up or taken down.

A smoke hole was cut into the grass roof on the east side above the doorway to allow smoke to escape.

The interior of the lodge was dry and dim. The doorways, smoke hole, and fire provided the only light. The beds were located between the wall of the lodge and the main support posts. The posts provided the frame and support for the raised beds. Because of the slope of the roof, this area made an ideal location for the sleeping area. The beds or sleeping platforms, made of poles and reeds lashed to posts and exterior poles, were raised about three feet from the floor. Buffalo robes served as mattresses and blankets. The beds had curtains made of hide which could be rolled up during the day and put down at night for privacy. Personal items and supplies could be stored under the beds or hung from the roof.

The hearth was located just to the east of the lodge center. The hearth provided warmth and light to the interior. Food could be cooked over the fire in clay pots; meat was roasted on sticks. Nearby on the floor was the grinding stone for corn.

The food storage pit or cache pit was another feature of Wichita culture found both inside and outside the lodge.

Sources: Gene Weltfish, *The Lost Universe*; Robert Lowie, *Indians of the Plains*.

## **Vocabulary**

Earth lodge – A home used by tribes such as the Pawnees, made from poles, and covered with earth and grass

Grass lodge – A house for tribes such as the Wichitas, made from poles, and covered with grass and sticks

Nomadic – To move with a purpose from place to place

Sedentary – Settled or permanent throughout the year

Semisedentary – Settled or permanent during part of the year and nomadic otherwise

## **Activities**

1. Review the previous lesson on the tipi or at this time briefly discuss with students information on the tipi. Ask students what kind of people lived in tipis. (Tribes that

moved around. Nomadic tribes.) Next tell students that other tribes lived in permanent homes and lived in tipis only when they went on hunts. (Semisedentary.)

2. Show students graphics #5 Wichita Grass Lodge and #6 Pawnee Earth Lodge. Ask students to name other types of Indian houses they know of. (List these on the blackboard.) Show students graphics #7 Sac and Fox bark House; #8 Summer House, Potawatomi; and #34 Types of Shelter.

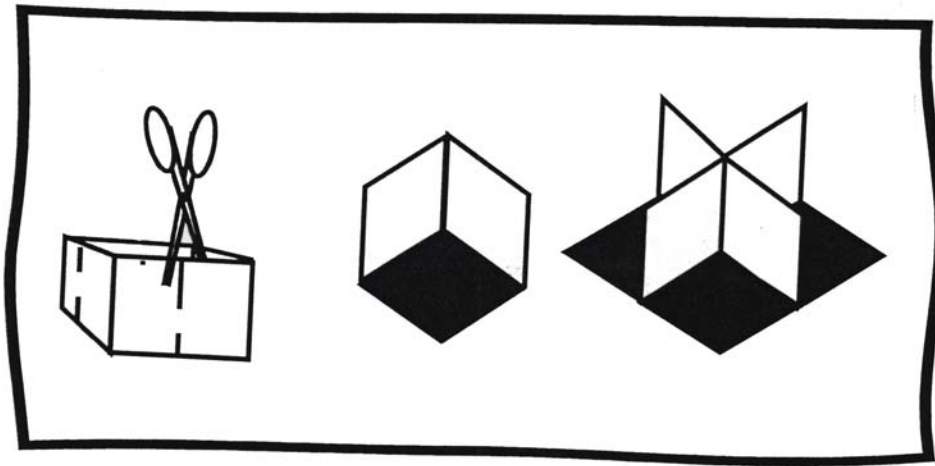


3. Have students make a list of the kinds of houses we live in today. This list may include brick, wooden, mobile home, log cabin, apartment, berm, condominium, etc.
4. Tell students that the environment very much affects how we live and our housing.
5. Ask students to pretend they are Native Americans many years ago and are choosing sites for their homes. Ask students what would be important to them if they were choosing a place to build their homes. (Animals nearby for food, clothing, shelter, water for drinking, cleanliness, crops, trees for fires, shelter.) Write answers on the blackboard and reinforce their importance.
6. Next talk about the selection of sites for homes today. Ask them what may be important. Answers may include jobs, good schools, medical care, safety, quiet neighborhood, farm, etc. You may wish to write these answers on the board to compare and contrast them with the list of things that Native Americans may have looked for in choosing a site. Have students list the similarities and differences.
7. Discuss with students the three types of Native American houses to be studied. These are the grass lodge, earth lodge, and tipi. You may wish to have graphic #34 Types of Shelter available for students to view as you talk about the houses. Three points you may want to include in your discussion with the students are:
  - a. Examples of tribes who lived in each house.
  - b. Materials need to build each type of house.
  - c. The appearance of the house including interior and exterior.

After having talked about the various houses, ask students which type of Indian housing they would prefer to live in and why.

8. Have students create a diorama. Students can either cut a shoe box into four sections, gluing the sides together or they may choose to make their favorite Native American-style house using the entire shoe box.

NOTE: This activity lends itself to a science/nature walk to collect materials for the different types of housing, for example, various types of trees, grass, dirt, plants, etc. The diorama can also be made by using construction paper.



### **Extended Activity:** Housing Coloring Book

#### **Trunk Resources**

##### Worksheets

#18 Painted tipis

#19 Grass lodge

##### Graphics

#34 Types of Shelter

#7 Sac and Fox Bark House

#8 Summer House, Potawatomi.

#### **Teacher Preparations**

Photocopy worksheets #18 Painted tipis and #19 Grass lodge.

Assemble drawing paper for students, crayons, markers, and/or colored pencils.

#### **Activity**

- a. Have students color worksheets #18 and #19
- b. Have students make a book of Native American houses. Have them use graphics #34 Types of Shelter; #7 Sac and Fox bark house; and #8 Summer house, Potawatomi for examples.
- c. You may wish to also include a blank sheet of paper and encourage students to draw pictures of their own homes as a comparison.