

# LESSON FIVE: Preparing Buffalo Hides

**Time**            30 minutes

## Trunk Resources

### Activity

- “Preparing Buffalo Hide” cards
- “Buffalo Hide” puzzle and hide puzzle pieces

### Graphics

- #12 Single Buffalo

### Objects

- Parfleche
- Moccasin
- Fur pouch
- Scraper
- Drum
- Shield

## Objectives

1. Students will distinguish between tanned hide, rawhide, and tanned hide with fur.
2. Students will sequence the steps in one of the three processes for tanned hide, rawhide, or tanned hide with fur.
3. Students will identify garments made from tanned hide, rawhide, and tanned hide with fur.

## Historical background

Plains Indians, like all Native Americans, learned to use their abundant resources and crafting skills to create a wide variety of decorative, comfortable clothing and body coverings. Buffalo skin was the basic fabric for the Plains Indians' clothing. Breechcloths, shirts, dresses, leggings, moccasins, and robes could be made from the buffalo hide.

Killing the buffalo was the man's job. Skinning the animal and preparing its hide, however, was women's work. Women made all the clothing, and they also added the decorations except when the men made their own drawings to depict personal accomplishments or visions.

Fresh hides were dressed by first stretching them on the ground and fastening them down with wooden pegs around the edges. Then the hide was scraped with a flat bone or a stone to get rid of any remaining meat or fat.

If a hide was to be used for a robe or a winter garment, the fur was left on it. If warmth was not important, the fur was removed. It was easier to remove the hair after

the hide was soaked in water for several days, but in some parts of the Great Plains it was not always possible to find enough water to do this.

To tan or soften a hide, women rubbed buffalo brains into it. During this treatment, the skin was stretched and squeezed time after time. The hide was then pulled back and forth over a smoothed post or a rawhide rope to continue to soften it. Finally, each side of the hide was dried over a fire made of green wood. The hide was generally formed into a cone shape to trap the smoke inside. The longer the hide was smoked, the darker it became. It took nearly a week to prepare one hide so it could be cut into the sizes and shapes needed.

The decorations on a hide garment depended on its use. Women enjoyed decorating, and each had her favorite designs. Designs were made with porcupine quills and dyed with plant juices. Later, women used glass beads instead of quills. For further information about beadwork see the Traditions brochure at the back of the manual.

Sources: Fiona MacDonald, *Plains Indians*; Robert Lowie, *Indians of the Plains*.

## **Vocabulary**

Bone awl – Used to make holes in hide so that sinew could be threaded through.

Buckskin – Usually refers to deer skin, but sometimes is used to mean any animal skin.

Fur – Tanned hide with hair of animal still remaining.

Moccasins – Footwear, usually made from tanned hide. Some moccasins have rawhide soles. Moccasins are sometimes partially or fully decorated.

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

Scraper – Tool made from bone used to scrape tissue, flesh, and fur from hide.

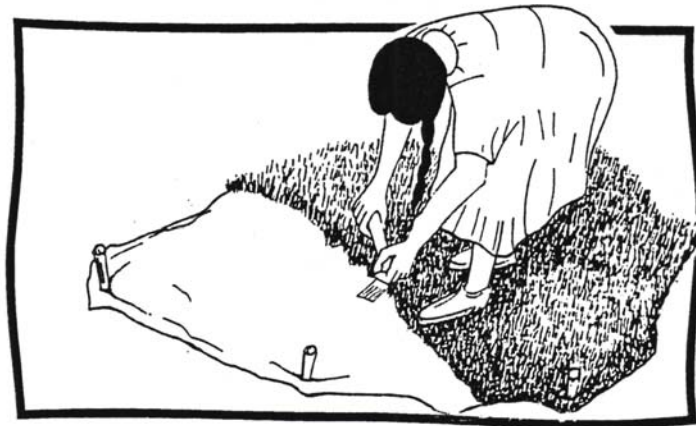
Sinew – Tendon found along the backbone of the buffalo and other animals; used for sewing thread.

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

## **Activities**

1. Ask students to look at their clothing and discuss where their clothes came from (store, catalog, handmade). If their clothes have been made by someone, ask them where the fabric came from. Ask students where they would get clothing if there were no stores.
2. Explain to students that Native Americans had to make their own clothing from materials available to them. The main materials for clothing came from the

- buffalo. Show students graphic #12 Single Buffalo. Explain that the buffalo was used for many things including food and clothing.
3. Comparing tanned hide with fur, tanned hide, and rawhide.
    - a. Show students a fur piece from the “Buffalo Hide Puzzle.” Ask students what items could be made from the fur and why. (Coat/robe, blanket, rug, moccasins, hat, etc.—fur would be used for cold-weather wear; most clothing could be used with the fur turned to the inside.) Show the fur pouch from the trunk as an example.
    - b. Show students a tanned hide piece from the “Buffalo Hide Puzzle.” Ask students what items could be made from tanned hide and why. (Dress, shirt, pants, leggings, purse, tipi, hat, etc.—tanned hide is softer and more comfortable for clothing.) Show the moccasin from the trunk as an example.
    - c. Show students a rawhide piece from the “Buffalo Hide Puzzle.” Ask students what items could be made of rawhide and why. (Storage containers such as the parfleche, soles of moccasins, shields, saddles, drums—rawhide is hard but flexible, tough, lightweight, rainproof and almost unbreakable; not comfortable for clothing.) Show the parfleche, drum, and shield from the trunk as examples.
  4. Still using skin samples, explain that several days of preparation are needed for the buffalo skins to look like the samples. Skins cannot be used without being treated. If they are not treated they quickly become hard and stiff and begin to rot and smell. Native Americans devised ways of treating the skins to keep them from spoiling.



Show the students the “Preparing a Buffalo Hide” game cards and explain each step. To produce RAWHIDE, choose card #1 and #2. For TANNED HIDE (with no fur), choose all five cards. For FUR, choose cards #1 - #3 - #4 - #5, and not #2.

Card #1:

- Fresh hides were dressed by first stretching them on the ground and fastening them down with wooden pegs around the edges. After the sun dried the hide, it was scraped with a flat bone or stone to get rid of any clinging meat or fat. Show students the scraper from trunk. Explain that this tool is made from bone and was used to scrape the hides.

Card #2:

- If the hide was to be used as RAWHIDE, the fur was scraped off or beaten off with a rock, and the skin was ready to use.
- If they were making TANNED HIDE for a summer garment or for some other use where warmth was not important, the fur was removed by scraping. If the hide was to be used for a robe or a winter garment, the fur was left on.
- NOTE: Hides that were taken from buffalo or other animals in late spring or summer were the easiest to prepare because the hair on the animals was thinner at those times of the year.

Card #3:

- To tan or soften a hide, the animal's brains were rubbed into the skin. During this process the skin was stretched and squeezed many times.

Card #4:

- The hide was pulled back and forth over a smoothed post or a rawhide rope to continue to soften it.

Card #5.:

- Finally, each side of the hide was dried over a fire. The hide was generally formed into a cone shape to trap the smoke inside. The longer the hide was smoked, the darker it became.
- NOTE: From start to finish, it took nearly a week to prepare one hide before it could be cut into the needed sizes and shapes.

5. When students understand the steps in preparing buffalo skins, have them break up into two groups and go to:

Activity area #1 – where the group will shuffle the “Preparing a Buffalo Hide” game cards and choose steps in order to make rawhide, tanned hide, and fur.

Activity area #2 – where the group will work with the Buffalo Hide puzzle. Have the students match the correct type of hide to each area of the puzzle. The shapes of the pieces match the spaces on the board.

## **Extended Activity:** Making mini moccasins

### **Trunk Resources**

Worksheet: #11 Moccasin pattern

#### Objects

Moccasin

Sinew

Bone awl

### **Teacher Resources**

Photocopy worksheet #11 Moccasin pattern for each student. Felt, pencil, scissors, heavy thread or yarn, darning needle, yarn for laces, and optional decorating tools such as fabric markers or beads and glue.

### **Activity**

This pattern is for a miniature moccasin, however, you may enlarge it to fit students.

- a. Show students the moccasin from the trunk. This moccasin is made from tanned hide. Show students the bone awl and explain that this was used to make holes in the hide so that sinew could be threaded through.
- b. Explain that the moccasin they will be making would have been made from tanned hide. Some moccasins were made with rawhide soles. Why? (Rawhide would be thicker, harder, and easier to walk in over rocky ground.)
- c. Have students cut out the pattern and trace two onto felt. Remind the student to flip the pattern over after the first one is traced to make a right and left shoe. Cut slits carefully.
- d. Have students use a whip stitch or running stitch to sew the moccasin to the bottom along the outer edge from the front along the side to the back.
- e. Students should now fold over flaps at the back over to form the heel. To secure, stitch through all the flaps in an X. Cut small slits around the top edge of the shoe and thread the strip of yarn through.
- f. Show students the decoration on the moccasin in the trunk. Have them use beads and glue, or fabric markers, to decorate their moccasins.

