How Leather Was Made

Hey Teachers!

Thanks for making the Wyoming State Museum a part of your classroom! This page will describe how to use this activity with your students!

Important Note:
During this activity, your students will be learning about how Native American people of the Great Plains lived from the mid 1600s through the mid 1800s. Although this activity focuses on one historic time period, it is vital that your students know that Native People still live in our communities as neighbors, classmates, friends, and leaders. Native Americans are not a culture that existed and then ceased to exist. More information on how to have this conversation can be found on the same Wyoming State Museum webpage that you downloaded this file from.

Introduction:
The bison was an incredibly important part of the People of the Great Plains' lives. Many different items were made from the bison, including a large number of leather objects. Some of these objects were made from tanned leather, and others from rawhide. This activity allows your students to learn about how tanned leather was made from bison hide.

Supplemental Activities:
It is recommended that you talk to your students about how the People of the Great Plains hunted bison before this leather-making activity. On our website, you'll find a couple of videos about bison hunting; you may use these videos, or simply have a conversation with your students about hunting.

Preparation:
Before you play this game with your students, read the game cards included in this document. Familiarize yourself with the steps that were required to make tanned leather. Additionally, print out one set of game cards for each student. You can have your students cut out their cards, or you can easily cut them all out with a paper cutter.

For the game board, you have two options. One option is to print out the letter-sized game board in this document and have your students tape the two pieces together. The other is to print out the ledger-sized game board from the same webpage you found this document on. Either way, you'll need one game board for each student.

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Activity:
Put your students in groups of 2-4 and have each group sit in a circle. They should mix up all their cards and spread them out, face down. To win the game, a student has to be the first to find all ten steps of the leather-making process – in order.

To play, they'll take turns drawing one card, like they were playing Memory. But, instead of looking for matches, each student is trying to find the first step of the hide tanning process. If a student draws the card showing the first step, they put the card on their game board. If they draw any card except the first step, they put it back (in the same spot) face down. Each student only gets to draw one card, per turn. After the first student goes, the student to their left takes their turn.

After a student finds the first step, they must find each step in order. Play continues until one student completes their entire game board.

After your students have played the game, maybe even a few times, walk your class through the ten steps and answer any questions they may have. When you participate in the museum's *Bison Culture* field trip, you'll see many of these items. This includes bison leather, bison fleshers, bison brains, and much more!

Hunt the Bison

For hundreds of years entire tribes worked together to funnel bison herds over deadly bison jumps. But when the tribes got horses, hunting became much easier! Hunters would use bows and spears to hunt while on horses.

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Skin the Bison

After the bison was hunted, the skin had to be removed quickly! The tribes used knives to cut the skin away from the bison's body. It was often soaked in water until they were done removing the meat and preserving it.

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Remove the Brain

The brain was a vital part of the tanning process. Leather could not be made without it! After the bison was skinned, the skull was cracked open, and the brain was removed. It was then set aside for them to use later.

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Stretch the Skin

A bison skin needed to be stretched before it could be scraped. Since bison are huge, the tribes could not use a wooden frame like they did for small animals. So, the skin was spread out on the ground and then staked down.

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Scrape the Skin

The skin had to have any bits of meat, fat, or tissue scraped off of it. This was hard work and required special tools called fleshers or scrapers. These tools were usually made from bison leg bones or elk antlers.

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Dehair the Skin

Some items made from bison skin (like bison robes) did not need the fur to be removed. Other items (like tipis, drums, and clothes) did. To remove the hair, the tribes used their fleshers to scrape the outside of the skin.

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Boil the Brain

Some tribes used raw brain for tanning, but boiling it was much more common. While being boiled in water, liver or fat was often added to the mixture. When it was a gooey paste, it was ready to be spread on the skin.

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Brain the Skin

The brain mixture had to be spread across the bison skin by hand. It took a lot of work to get it really rubbed in! If the skin had the bison hair removed, the mixture had to be rubbed into both sides.

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Soften the Skin

After the skin dried, it needed to be softened by pulling and bending it. The tribes laid the skin across a stretched rope, branch, or tree trunk and then pulled it back and forth. This took a long time and was a lot of hard work!

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Smoke the Skin

The last step was to apply smoke to the skin. The skin was held up by a frame made of sticks. Then, a fire was built under it. The smoke changed the color of the skin and helped it stay soft, if it ever got wet again.

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Step 2:

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Step 6:

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Step 7:

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Step 4:

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Step 9:

Soften
the Skin

Step 10:

Smoke
the Skin