

Stretching more than 2,000 miles north to south between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River, the Great Plains supported about 150,000 Native Americans in 1800. More than 30 tribes inhabited this region of tall-grass prairies and short-grass high plains. Although there was a great deal of diversity among the Plains tribes, they shared many common characteristics.

Dependence on buffalo is a primary characteristic of the Plains groups. With rainfall sparse on the High Plains, tribes were dependent on buffalo as their main food source, whereas the tribes of the Prairie Plains combined farming with buffalo hunting. Buffalo not only provided meat for the Plains tribes but also hides for clothing, shelter, and containers; bones and horns for tools; hair for ropes; and dried dung for fuel. Before they obtained horses, which had been brought to the Southwest by the Spanish in the 1500s, the Plains groups traveled and hunted on foot. After acquiring horses, they developed into skilled horsemen and horses became an important part of their hunting activities and lifestyle. Many of the Plains items on display in the Museum are related to the hunting lifestyle of these groups and represent the work of peoples such as the Sioux, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Omaha, and Osage.



Buffalo hunting techniques of the Plains tribes



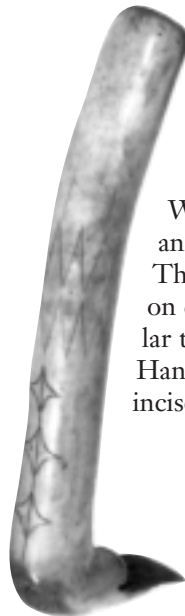
Blackfoot women with child and horse travois, ca. 1900.

Travois

Seasonal buffalo migrations meant a nomadic lifestyle for many Plains groups as they followed the herds throughout the year. A horse-drawn or dog-drawn travois was often used to transport belongings. A travois is an A-frame device of two long poles with either a ladder or hoop carrying section, like the one on display.

Parfleche

While hunting and butchering were tasks for men of the Plains tribes, women were responsible for processing the meat and hides. One product made by women was the parfleche, an envelope-shaped rawhide container. Parfleches were hung from a saddle during travel and used to carry food and clothing.



Elkbone scraper

Women used scrapers to reduce animal skins to a uniform thickness. The early 20th-century Omaha scraper on display has an elkbone handle similar to the Iowa scraper pictured. Handles were often decorated with incised and colored lines.

Maul and Hide Bowl

Mauls and hide bowls were used by Plains peoples to make pemmican, a preserved meat made by mixing finely pounded dried buffalo meat, boiled fat, and chokecherries. Mauls were used to pound the meat and berries and for cracking bones to boil the marrow. Pemmican was very nutritious and could last for years if kept dry.



Crow or Cheyenne women making pemmican, ca. 1900.

Resources

- DeMallie, Raymond J. *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 13, *Plains*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001.
- Lowie, Robert H. *Indians of the Plains*. Natural History Press, 1963.
- Murdoch, David. *North American Indian*. Eyewitness Books Series, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

Credits

Map from DeMallie (p. ix). Photos are from DeMallie (Buffalo hunting, p. 7, Scraping skins, p. 8; Pemmican, p. 59; Scraper, p. 434); and Murdoch (Travois and hunting on horseback, p. 28)