Assiniboine Children

[Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site](http://www.nps.gov/fous/index.htm)

### Overview

Although Assiniboine children and modern children are from in entirely different time periods, they share similar childhood experiences. They had chores, toys, grandparents, parents, and similar games. This lesson goes into aspects of Assiniboine culture with an emphasis on the toys that Assiniboine children received from their parents.   
  
  
**Assiniboine Woman and her Tipi**

**Assiniboine** children received educational toys (like miniature tipis and hide scrapers) which helped explain how to use various tools, and familiarized children on how to make and move the tipis. Assiniboine (uh-Sin-uh-boin) people dwelled in tipis. Assiniboine homes needed to be mobile in order to follow the bison migrations. **Nomadic**: describing people who have no permanent home but move from place to place, as in hunters who follow buffalo herds. The word “Assiniboine” is a Chippewa word meaning “stone cookers.” This refers to stone boiling, the practice of heating stones directly in a fire and then placing them in water for cooking. The Assiniboine called themselves Nakota (NAH-ko-da), meaning “generous people.” The Assiniboine originally descended from the Yanktonai Dakota and broke off from them sometime before 1640. Assiniboine tradition holds that they broke with the Yanktonais while living in Upper Mississippi and then moved north to join the Crees.

Assiniboine parents constructed toy tipis out of cottonwood leaves or hide strips for their children. **Hide**, or skin, of the buffalo was used to make clothing, blankets, and tipis. **Parfleches** are hide cases used to hold tipi furnishings or **pemmican** (A food made of dried strips of buffalo meat pounded into paste, mixed with fruit, and shaped into cakes). **Travois** were two large poles attached together at one end creating an **acute angle** (an angle that is less than 90 degrees). This end was latched to a dog or horse. A laced circle (like a snowshoe) between the two long poles held tipi furnishings or the tipi.

Assiniboine mothers put together toy parfleches and made toy dogs & travois out of sticks. The small stick dogs were latched to stick travois loaded with small parfleches or a small hide tipi. Girls played camp with toy lodges by pitching the tipis in groups to represent bands (groups of people of the same nation who lived together in camps), and they visited from one group to another. Boys played with the girls' tipi camps by scaring them or playing warrior. Children played with each other like children today play “house.” Modern children play with plastic kitchen utensils, plastic food, cars, and doll houses. Assiniboine boys used small bows and arrows while riding stick horses to practice hunting skills. Assiniboine girls and boys played together until the boys were old enough to practice hunting small game. Assiniboine parents constructed toys that resembled objects used in everyday Plains Indian life just like parents today buy toys that resemble things in everyday life.

Assiniboine daughters were taught to sew, cook, dress small skins, and garnishing clothing with beads and quills. Assiniboine mothers clothed their daughter’s dolls with leather dresses and beaded in the style which her parents wore in the winter. Women decorated brain-tanned hides with dyed porcupine quills. The quills were boiled in natural dyes found in nature, flattened with a bone flattener, and then sewn to the hide in beautiful designs with thin strips of sinew. Quills, flattener, sinew and bone needle were kept in pouches made from an animal bladder. Assiniboine daughters’ first handcrafts were celebrated. Upper Missouri Plains Indian men valued the craftsmanship of their wives. Consequently a woman’s ability to put together fine handcrafts and clothing helped her attract a worthy future husband.

Assiniboine daughters received toys that resembled the tools she would use as an adult. For instance, Assiniboine fathers made tools for scraping hides, and Assiniboine mothers directed their daughters on how to use them. Assiniboine fathers made hide scrapers out of elk horns latched to a piece of sharp metal or bone. A buffalo hides were stretched with ropes and hammered to the ground with pegs, or the hides were stretched with rope between a square frames. Scrapers were used to take off any remaining parts of the buffalo that were not needed for the hide. Mothers instructed their daughters on how to scrap hides and prepare them for trade or for use in the home. Buffalo hides were used to make tipis, buffalo boats, robes, clothing, moccasins, quivers, and parfleches. Toy scrapers symbolized an essential task for future Assiniboine women.

**Tipis** are shelters used by many Upper Missouri Plains tribes such as the Assiniboine. The average size of an Assiniboine tipi was 6-14 buffalo hides depending on the size of the buffalo hide. Generally 12 to 14 summer-killed cow buffalo hides with the wool removed were used to make the tipi covering. A regular tipi was 14 feet high which is about the size of a one story building (10+ feet). A regular tipi was 14 feet wide, so it is probably only as wide as a child’s bedroom. 20 hides made an extra-large tipi, but any more would be too cumbersome for the horses or dogs to carry.

Assiniboine women usually performed the bloody job of skinning and butchering bison used to make the hides needed to construct the tipi. Assiniboine women cut the meat into strips and dried them in the sun like beef jerky. No part of the bison was wasted. Not even bison scat or **buffalo chips**; they were used as fuel for cooking or heating tipis when timber was scarce. Bison horns were carved into spoons and cups. Assiniboine women served popular dishes like buffalo stew and berry pudding with buffalo horn spoons. Plains Indian women braided bison hair into rope. Bison bladders were dried and used as water containers. Plains Indian women scrapped and tanned the hides sewed together with sinew to construct tipis.

Lodges were erected with poles from lodge pole pine trees. A tripod was set up and the rest of the poles were added. The number of poles used depended on the size of the lodge. The bottom of the lodge was secured to the ground by wooden pegs made from the chokecherry branches. The tipi front was laced together below and above the entrance with wooden chokecherry tree pins. The tops of the pegs and pins were carved, and bands of bark in various widths were left intact as ornaments. Ventilation was regulated by two large flaps one each side of the smoke hole. Two extra poles governed the flaps outside. If there was smoke in the lodge because of a wind change, a woman went outside to move the flap poles in order to regulate the draft.

**Assiniboine Man and his Bow**

“*Among our people everyone is expected to marry and raise children. In order to make a success of marriage the father must be a good provider- and that means a good hunter. Look to your equipment and use it skillfully. Study the habits of animals and birds and learn to take them at the right time and in the correct manner. Make your kills neatly and quickly, or else you and your family will have to eat sour meat from exhausted game*.” –James Larpenteur Long, an Assiniboine writer.

Assiniboine fathers made toy bows and arrows, wooden guns, and other toys for their sons. After the age of 10, fathers and grandfathers trained boys to be warriors and hunters. As he grew, he received stronger bows and hunted animals like birds and rabbits. He learned to track, kill and skin them. Assiniboine children played fun games like double ball and shinny ball with hide balls. These games were played in fields with sticks much and had rules similar to hockey or lacrosse. In the winter, tops made from buffalo horns or ashwood were spun on the ice. Sticks were thrown at targets placed against snow banks in order to improve their accuracy for hunting. Sliding down hill was the most popular sport in which the boys and girls used pieces of hides or dried badger skins for sleds.

At the age of 17 or 18, he made his first excursion to capture an enemy’s horse. Horses were not only a symbol of wealth; they made acquiring bison easier and dragged travois farther. Although horses were essential, Assiniboine elders advised boys to travel on foot as much as possible. “If you wish to keep on being a fast runner, you should not ride horses, as your legs will be bowed and your joints will grow fast together.” Assiniboine elders did not want young men to become lazy by riding their horses everywhere. Running was important because a warrior did not always have his horse. From a young age, boys were trained in hunting, riding, and warfare.

Assiniboine men typically made bows of ash trees and bowstrings were made out of twisted sinew. Arrow shafts were also made of chokecherry wood. Arrowheads of flaked stone were replaced by metal points after the fur traders came. The Assiniboine were one of the last tribes to adopt the gun. Every man had a shield for protection from arrows. A young man fasted and prayed to receive a vision, and he painted this image onto his shield. The outer cover of the shield was brain-tanned with decorations and symbols believed to have spiritual power that protected the warrior. A well-made shield, bow, arrows and a strong, swift horse were essential to an Assiniboine warrior.

In summer, bands of Assiniboine families moved camp in search of large herds of buffalo. They had a special way of hunting large herds of buffalo, without using horses to chase them. Special enclosures called **buffalo pounds** were built of wooden poles and branches. Runners wearing buffalo calf robes lured herds of buffalo toward the pounds. These men knew how to cry and, act like buffalo calves, attracting mother buffaloes toward the pound. Other hunters waited silently in their places, hidden or disguised. At just the right moment, an experienced hunter who was called the Master of the Pound signaled. Then everyone waved and shouted, chasing the herd into the pound. They shut the gate, killed the buffalo with bows and arrows, skinned and divided the meat. If a hunter began to move or make noise too soon, the herd might stampede, and the hunt could be ruined. He would be punished severely because the people might go hungry for a long time. After the introduction of horses to the Upper Missouri, Assiniboine hunted buffalo on horseback.

Each band had a **chief**, or leader, who was wise, experienced, admired, trusted, honorable, brave and generous. The chief’s son was not always the next chief. A person who had made a name for himself in warfare, hunting and kindness to the poor was often made the next chief. The council reviewed his war and hunting record and also the family life of the man. Generally potential chief’s possessed many horses for domestic use and fast horses used as **buffalo runners**. Buffalo runners were hunters who rode horseback and hunted buffalo. On his hunting trips he must kill more game than his household required, so that he could distribute the surplus to the poor. In this way, he was considered generous.

While their parents worked, the grandparents watched over children and shared their advice. Elders were senior members of the Assiniboine who acted as advisors to people in the camp. Family members went to them for guidance. Elders knew the old stories and taught them to the children in the camp. Assiniboine did not have a written language, so stories were used to teach values, history, rules and codes of behavior. They shared advice like, “Don’t rummage through bags that belong to others, if you do, warts will grow on your hands. Repeated acts will make the warts grow larger and, in time, they will cover your hands.” As children grew, Assiniboine parents expected children to help with family chores and stay quiet. Boys and girls helped mother gather turnips, gathered grass for the tipi liner, and gathered tipi stones. **Tipi stones** were placed around the tipi on the hides in order to keep wind from blowing under the hides and into the tipi. Modern children help with chores around the house like Assiniboine children helped their parents around the tipi.

Tipi Rings are large, oblong circles of stones on the ground may be the remains of American Indian lodges, especially if the ground in the area looks warn. There may be more than one circle. Please do not collect the stones or disturb the circles. Take pictures of them, if you wish, and report the site to a university or National Park Ranger’s office. If you disturb them, information about how the American Indians really lived will be gone forever.

**Glossary:**

**Acute angle**: less than 90 degrees Bands: groups of people of the same nation who lived together in camps

**Buffalo chips**: bison scat Buffalo pounds: enclosures built out of wooden poles and branches used to corral buffalo

**Buffalo runners**: hunters who rode horseback and hunted buffalo

**Chief**: Each band had a chief, or leader, who was wise, experienced, admired, trusted, honorable, brave and generous.

**Elders**: senior members of the Assiniboine who acted as advisors to people in the camp.

**Hide**: skin of the buffalo was used to make clothing, blankets, and tipis.

**Nomadic**: describing people who have no permanent home but move from place to place, as in hunters who follow buffalo herds.

**Parfleches**: hide cases used to hold tipi furnishings or pemmican

**Pemmican**: A food made of dried strips of buffalo meat pounded into paste, mixed with fruit, and shaped into cakes

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**Travois**: two large poles attached together at one end creating an acute angle. This end was latched to a dog or horse. A laced circle (like a snowshoe) between the two long poles held tipi furnishings or the tipi.

Park Connections

Fort Union epitomizes the mutually advantageous interaction of American Indian and European American cultures associated with the fur-trading empire on the Upper Missouri region of the American frontier. Daily life at Fort Union Trading Post reflected the social and economic relationship between and within American Indian and European American cultures associated with the 19th century fur-trading empire.

### Additional Resources

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