

Grade 5 Informational

Living Off the Earth

Imagine a life quite different from the one you live. Imagine there are no ready-made houses or clothing. Imagine that you can't just go out and buy food or medicine, because there are no stores. Instead, you must depend on what nature offers. How would you get along? What would you do?

The ways that Native Americans lived can give some answers. Two hundred to three hundred years ago, the people who lived in the area that is now the United States made their homes and clothing from what the earth supplied. They used plants for medicine, and they caught or gathered all their food.

Shelters and Clothing

Some Native American tribes lived where there was plenty of food. These people stayed in one place and used wood, stones, mud, or clay to build homes that would last a long time. Other tribes, such as the Apache, moved often in search of food. They needed shelters that they could take with them, so they built tipis. It was easy to move a tipi. The Native Americans could take down the tipis and put the long poles of wood and buffalo skins onto a "travois." This was a sled that a horse pulled.

Some Native Americans made clothing and shoes called "moccasins" from animal skins. In the southwestern areas, the Pueblo people made clothing from cotton that they grew and wove into yarn. The Navajo people wove wool into blankets and rugs. Along the northwestern coast, the Chinook tribe was one of several tribes that made clothing from the bark of the cedar tree.

Native Americans needed tools in order to build shelters, to make clothing, and to grow, hunt, and prepare food.

Tool Time

Where there were trees, people used wood to create bows, arrows, spears, and digging sticks. A digging stick was a piece of hard wood about three feet long. People stripped the stick of all bark and sharpened one end into a point. They poked holes into the ground for planting seeds. These sticks also lifted out roots and dug up plants that could be eaten.

Some people made tools from stone, too. They found rocks along riverbanks, lakeshores, and ocean coasts. From these stones, Native Americans made hammers, farming tools, and the heads of axes and arrows. They used thin, sharp pieces of stone to cut meat. They also scraped animal hides to make leather.

Bone was another useful material for making tools. People made sewing needles out of

animal bones. They also made awls. An awl had a slim handle and a sharp point. People used awls for punching holes in leather. They could then sew the leather into tipi coverings, clothing, or moccasins.

Tying Things Up

In order to sew, fish, or tie things together, Native Americans made their own rope, cord, string, and line. Many plants are made of fiber, a material that is like thread. People twisted, rolled, or braided strands of fiber together. More fiber could be twisted to the ends of these strands. The string or rope could be as long as people needed.

Some Native Americans also made cords from the sinew of animals. Sinew is the stretchy band of tissue that fastens a muscle to a bone.

Plenty of Plants

Native Americans ate plants, of course. But they also used many plants as medicine. And when water wasn't easy to find in the southwestern desert, people in that area knew to cut open a cactus. There would be water inside.

A fistful of dry grass could mop up morning dew from rocks and plants. The water would then be squeezed from the grass into a jug or pot.

A plant with many uses was the cattail. This plant grows in wet areas. The top of the cattail looks like a brown, fuzzy sausage. The western Paiute tribe was one tribe that twisted the plant's leaves into rope or wove them into baskets, mats, cradles, and hats. The fluffy part inside the head of the cattail made great diaper material and bandages.

Life for most people in the United States is quite a bit different today. With department stores and supermarkets, people don't have to make many of the things they use. But the Native Americans did, and the earth gave them everything they needed.

Grade 5 Narrative

The Bread Lesson

My dad has watermelon-size biceps, a neck like an inner tube, and enormous, muscular hands that make him seem like he's always wearing baseball mitts. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would bake great bread, but he is and he does. Every Saturday he puts on his chef's apron, rolls up his sleeves, breaks out a bag of flour, and produces two loaves of homemade bread. When he's done, the whole house smells delicious, and I can't wait for a hot slice smothered with yellow, melting butter.

The rest of the week, Dad is a car mechanic, which involves lots of heavy lifting, tightening, unscrewing, shoving, shaking, yanking, and banging. People tend to think of their cars as metallic members of the family, so there's lots of pressure on Dad to make sure pumps pump, steering steers, and brakes brake. The shop where Dad works is understaffed, so he's under a lot of stress. Sometimes I worry he's going to overheat and blow a gasket or something, like some old car. I think Dad began baking bread to help him relax. I see him in the kitchen, working on a spongy hunk of dough—punching and pounding it into submission.

I've been feeling kind of stressed out myself since I found out I didn't qualify for the swim team. Now I'll have to wait a whole year to try out again; that might as well be a million years. Plus, I'm taking some tough classes this year, and my best friend moved away.

I think Dad knew I was feeling pressure. He sat next to me on the sofa last Saturday and asked me how things were going. I said OK, even though I didn't feel OK at all. He looked at me for a moment, then he said it was time for me to help. He got up from the sofa and headed to the kitchen.

I couldn't imagine what help I could offer. Still, I followed right behind him. Once we were standing by the counter, Dad gave me one of his old aprons. He slipped it on over my head and tied it in the back with such obvious pride that you'd think I was being knighted, which felt kind of silly but also kind of nice. I was being initiated as a bread-baker.

Next Dad got out his enormous stainless-steel mixing bowl, handed me a large wooden spoon, and told me to stir while he added the ingredients. He threw in a large handful of flour from a sack. A haze of flour dust began to hover in the air like fog. He then sprinkled salt into the bowl. Dad isn't big on measuring. He instinctively knows exactly how much of each ingredient to use, and the bread always turns out great. The entire operation was accomplished as if we were part of a NASA space launch. Flour? Check. Yeast? Check. Milk? Check. Sugar, shortening, and salt? Check, check, check.

When I had stirred the flour and milk mixture into a thick, gooey lump, Dad had me turn it over onto the countertop, which had been dusted with flour. Then he showed me how to knead the dough—repeatedly pushing away at the rubbery glob, stretching it out, pounding it,

and folding it in on itself. As I kneaded it, I felt the dough come to life beneath my hands. It took ten minutes and a surprising amount of energy to corral the unruly blob into a neat, round mass.

Next came the most difficult, and surprising, part: doing nothing. We put the dough back into the metal bowl. Then we waited for more than an hour for the dough to slowly swell up and double in size. Next we deflated the risen dough by punching it down. We divided it in two and waited for it to rise again. Afterward, we put the dough into pans and waited another hour for the dough to rise and double one last time. Dad said the waiting is always the hardest part because of the sharp, sweet smell coming from the yeast.

“It’s hard to resist putting the dough directly into the oven, but if you do, the loaves will be small, and the bread will be tough. The most important lesson of all is learning to be patient,” Dad explained.

While we waited, we sat and talked. Silence is a blank space that begs to be filled. It’s like the dough—it swells up and fills a room with emptiness unless you punch it down with words. It felt good to be still and listen to each other. It felt good to open up and share our thoughts. As the flour dust in the kitchen quietly settled, time seemed to slow down. The dough was going to rise at its own pace. We could do nothing to make it rise faster. As I accepted that, I stopped watching the clock and drumming my fingers on the tabletop. I started enjoying the quiet time with Dad. My father taught me how to bake bread, but I think I learned something more. I learned to appreciate the slowly ticking rhythm of time. I learned to relax and let the bread rise.