

Lesson 4 Reading

American Indians of the Great Plains

The Great Plains cultural region is a vast area of treeless grasslands. In the United States, the Great Plains stretch for about 2,000 miles from the Rockies to the Mississippi Valley, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The eastern part of this region has more water and softer soil than the western part. In the drier west, short, dense grasses provided perfect grazing for millions of bison.

Bison Hunters

On the eastern Great Plains, various groups took up farming, only going on bison-hunting trips a few months each year. On the western Great Plains, American Indians followed bison herds much of the year.

In the spring and early summer, small groups lay in ambush where bison came. The hunters gripped hardwood bows reinforced with strips of bison tendon. Taking aim, each man let loose a wooden arrow tipped

with a sharp stone and arrayed with feathers to help it fly straight.

In the fall, huge bison herds gathered, and Plains people traveled in larger bands. The men sometimes trapped the bison by circling the herd while on horseback. The men forced the bison closer together as they approached a cliff. Sometimes people set a grass fire or made loud noises to panic the bison until the animals stampeded over the cliff edge. Below, waiting hunters finished them off with spears or bows and arrows.

Using the Bison

Bison provided the main food for Plains people. Women and young girls cut up the bison with bone knives, and extra meat was dried and kept for winter.

Plains people used every part of the bison. Bison hides were turned into shields, waterproof containers, warm robes, and bedding. For clothing and bags, women softened the hides with scrapers and rubbed in bison brains and fat. Bison hair and sinew (tough cords made

from the animals' tendons) were twined into bowstrings and rope. Horns and hooves became spoons and bowls or were boiled down to make glue. Dried bison dung provided fuel for fires.

Bison provided materials for housing as well. Using tendons as thread, women sewed many bison hides together. The skins were then fastened around a tall cone of poles to make a *tepee*, a Plains word for “dwelling.”

Plains people became even more successful hunters when Spanish explorers introduced horses to the region. With horses, they could bring down more bison and move faster and more comfortably to new hunting grounds.



American Indians of the Eastern Woodlands

The Eastern Woodlands cultural region reaches from the Mississippi River eastward to the Atlantic Ocean and from Canada to North Carolina. Winter snows and summer rains produced plentiful forests, lakes, and streams.

Two major language groups emerged in this cultural region. In most of the territory, people spoke Algonquian

(al-GON-kwee-in) languages. In New York and around the southern Great Lakes lived the Iroquoian-speaking groups.

Plentiful Woods

The forests provided most of what the Haudenosaunee (hoe-dee-no-SHOH-nee), commonly referred to as the Iroquois (EER-uh-kwoi), needed to live. For food, hunters prowled through the forests to track deer. Men also hunted bears, trapped beavers, and caught birds and fish. Women gathered fresh greens, nuts, and berries. They made syrup by boiling down sap from maple trees.

Instead of walking through the thick forests, Iroquois often paddled log and bark canoes along lakes and rivers. Because waterways also provided fish and drinking water, Iroquois built their villages nearby.

Each settlement could have dozens of sturdy log-frame houses covered with elm bark. Such longhouses were

usually about 20 feet wide and up to 400 feet long. Several families lived in sections of the longhouse.

Women Farmers

To clear a space for farming, Iroquois men burned away trees and underbrush. Women did the rest of the farming. After hoeing the soil, they planted corn, sometimes several varieties. Around the cornstalks, they let beans twine. Squash grew near the ground, keeping down weeds and holding moisture in the soil.

When the planting was done, women tanned deerskin to make skirts, capes, and moccasins (soft shoes). They sometimes scraped corn kernels with bone tools and ground the corn between stones. In the fall, they stored the harvest, often in large bark barrels in the longhouses. Iroquois crops included sunflowers, tobacco, and many vegetables that are still planted in American gardens today.



American Indians of the Southeast

The Southeast cultural region stretches from the southern part of the Ohio Valley to the Gulf of Mexico and from Texas to the Atlantic Ocean. This region's fertile coastal plains, river valleys, mountains, and swamps all have long, warm, humid summers and mild winters. In this green countryside, the people of the Southeast found growing crops fairly easy.

Towns Built Around Mounds

Some Southeastern peoples built towns **dominated** by large earthen mounds. The first mounds were likely burial sites. Centuries later, people made mounds several stories high as platforms for temples.

Building these mounds took months, even years, because people had to move the dirt one basketful at a time. Workers building mounds had less time to help grow or find food. However, Southeastern groups had developed a type of corn that grew so fast, they could harvest plenty of crops for the year. Farmers raised enough food to feed the people building the mounds.

A single Southeastern town might have had 2 to 12 mounds arrayed around a central town plaza. People

clustered their houses around these mounds. They built their homes from posts of young trees constructed into a rectangular frame and plastered with mud. Roofs were pointed and made of leaves.

A Fertile Region

Beyond their homes, fields lay in all directions. With the region's long growing season, Southeastern people relied on corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers for most of their food.

Women worked the fields with hoes made of stone, shell, or animal shoulder blades fastened to wooden handles. Men sometimes hunted, using blowguns for squirrels, rabbits, and turkeys and bows and arrows for large animals like deer. Sometimes they even brought home alligators and turtles.

To complete their varied diet, women gathered edible plants like sweet potatoes and persimmons. They wore short deerskin skirts, so they didn't have to spend much time making clothing. Instead, they had time to fashion rings, earrings, arm rings, and hairpins from stones, shells, bones, and other natural materials.

