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**Lesson:** Plains Indians Building products.

**Lesson Objective(s):** Students will learn about what products Plains Indians used a long time ago for building shelters. Students will understand the cultural value and meaning of the tipi. Students will also learn about the different purposes and uses of the tipi.

Today's homes are built from many different building products, such as engineered composite products. Those can be such things as, pressed wood chips, fiberboard, particleboard, hardwood, OSB, laminate lumber, reinforced beams, and fiber polymer composite, to name a few. Long ago, some of the Plains Indians lived in a conical-shaped shelter called a Tipi (English terminology). The Lakota term for home or dwelling was "tiyata". Their tipis were made from animal hides, such as deer, elk, or buffalo! Today a lot of tipis are made from canvas. There are many stories about the Plains Indian tipi and its purpose or uses.

It has always been my understanding that the main purpose for the tipi was as a shelter. Other uses for the tipi were for ceremonial purposes, family gatherings, and/or meeting purposes. This was a mobile style of home, as it could be taken down and put up quickly. The reason for this type of housing was because it gave the Plains people easy access to being able to follow their main food source, which was buffalo at that time. The Lakota people and or Plains Indians used the buffalo for everything; so they needed to be able to move in a quick time frame, or at a moment's notice, to follow buffalo when they moved or followed their migration route.

The Lakota Plains tipi was made and put together using the following products.

- They used mainly buffalo hides; 12 to 15 tanned buffalo hides were sewn together to make a conical shape.
- 15 to 20 long wooden poles called lodge poles; usually, some type of pine tree as they grew straighter and had fewer knots on them.
- Wooden or bone stakes for helping to tie down the bottom of the tipi.
- Small rocks for helping to make tie-downs for securing the tipi to the ground.
- Medium-sized rocks for putting around the outside of the tipi to help secure it to the ground.
- Sinew (rawhide skin dried and made into rope) and/or rope made from horsehair or buffalo wool, to hold the tipi together.
- Sinew for making ties to tie the tipi down to the stakes.

Tipis were made and put together by the women of the Tribe. If a family chose to paint the tipi and/or put family designs on the tipi, this was the responsibility of the man or warrior at that time. Each family had their own designs and family patterns to put on their tipis.

The making of a tipi was started by creating a tripod, using three poles, tied at the top (Lakota style). Most tipis faced the east when they were put up: Two poles faced west and the door pole faced towards the east. When the tripod is in place, 4 more poles are placed to the right of the east door pole. When that is completed, 4 more poles are placed to the left side of the door. Then you continue to place 3 poles in the back of the tipi. When that is completed, you continue to place it on top of the previous pole, creating a spiral, which helps to take water out and down the side of the tipi. After completing the conical pole-shaped circle, you tie it down and stake it to the ground. The 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> pole is called the lift pole and the covering is attached to the top of that pole and placed at the back of the tipi. It is then unraveled off the lift pole and unrolled out around the rest of the poles to form the round or conical shape. The door is put together and held in place by using small pieces of wooden stakes or dowels to lace up the door and attach it. Two poles will be needed for adjusting the flaps. The flaps are used to keep out water and let out the smoke. Once things are in place they can be adjusted so everything fits better.

Special circumstances involved could cause a specific tipi to be placed facing a different direction, depending on the reasoning and purpose. A heyoka (Lakota term for backward medicine man or person) might be justified in placing his tipi in a different direction.

The cultural and symbolic meanings are many, depending on who and which Tribe is putting up the tipi. Most Tribal people will see the tipis as a circle or circular shape and will read that as the "Circle of Life". The circle of life is non-ending and has 4 stages of life and is connected to the 4 directions. Baby-hood, adolescent adult, adult, and old age; you are ending where you begin at. The floor of the tipi usually represents the Earth (Maka-Lakota term). Each pole represents and tells a journey or story for each family; and there are many stories for each family, good times and bad times. The knowledge of how to erect a tipi and its cultural and symbolic meanings are important to indigenous people; why, because it addresses the issues of their ethnic and Tribal Identities.

Please answer the following questions with complete sentences.

- 1) Can water leak or run into tipis. Why or Why not?
- 2) How many poles does it take to make a tipi?
- 3) Tipi coverings can be made from what type or kinds of materials?
- 4) How long does it take to put up and or take down a tipi?
- 5) Write about some of the symbolic meanings of the tipi and its poles.

**Resource(s) for learning more about tipi building:**

**A)** Google and type [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). Click on youtube and type into the search box: “How to set up a tipi”. There are several video’s to watch about setting up tipis. Select one video about “How to set up a tipi”. After watching the video, write a short paragraph on new things you learned about setting up a tipi.

**B)** You may also draw a picture of a tipi and the designs you would put on it. Please explain the meaning of the patterns or designs you put on your tipi.