

Living Close to the Land

Calendar Stick

Pre-visit activity, all grades

Adapted from Native American Crafts Workshop, B. Berstein and L. Blair

Objectives

Students will observe and record seasonal changes and special events.

Materials

- Long flat stick, one per student (can use paint stirring sticks or wooden yardsticks, spray paint white to cover printing if necessary)
- Hammer and nail or drill with 1/8" bit
- Leather cord (6" long)
- Poster paints and brushes or thin permanent markers

Background

The Winnebago people notched sticks as a way to record time and important events such as a meteor shower or the birth of a family member. Notches on the front of the stick represented the winters, or years. Calendar sticks were handed down from generation to generation, similar to how we pass down photo albums and scrapbooks.

Tribes in the Plains Region recorded time and events by painting symbolic figures, or pictographs, on large animal skins. This kind of calendar was called a "winter count" (the new year began in winter) and might cover many years. Many Native American tribes measured days as suns and nights as sleeps. The Zuni divided the year in half, leaving half the moons "named," and the other half "unnamed." The unnamed moons were known by symbolic colors. The year was called "the passage of time," the seasons the "steps," and

months the "crescents." Some tribes named their months or moons after an activity that took place during that time of the year, or after animals or stars seen during the month.

Procedure

Hammer a nail or drill a hole in the top center of the stick. Slip the cord through the hole and tie the ends.

Native Americans began the calendar on the first day of the year or on the day of an important event, such as the first snow or a birthday. The Winnebago made their first notch at the sound of the first thunder in the autumn. Begin your class calendar sticks on the first day of a new month, or when beginning a new unit of study, or at the New Year's start. Record the time or occasion with marks and picture symbols.

Hang the calendar stick on a hook or a nail in a place where students can reach them easily. Continue to record moons from month to month and make a symbol for every special occasion during the count. Include special events so that many winters from now the picture record will be a "scrapbook" of events. Students can either record strictly school events, or you can encourage them to include home and family events, such as births, birthdays, trips, etc.