

PARFLECHE THE INDIAN'S SUITCASE

by Carl Moreus

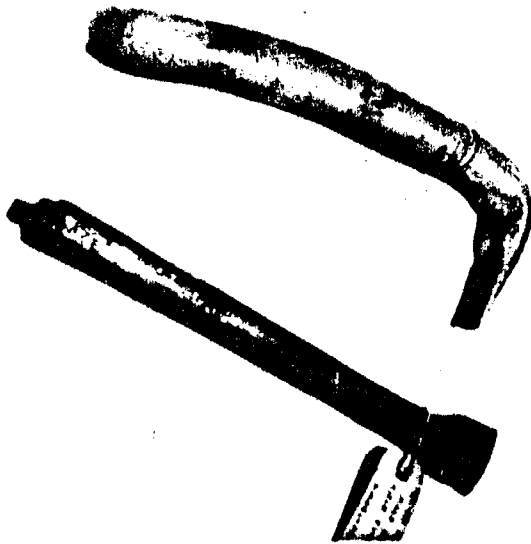


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Figure 1. Top; Sioux hide scraper, Bottom; Flesher made from rifle barrel. Ken Kinkade Collection.

Years ago the term *parfleche* (*par'flesh*) was used to designate rawhide, and most any article made from it. But we generally think of *parfleches* as being the brightly painted rawhide envelopes that were used by most of the plains tribes.

The word *parflesh* was probably derived from the French *par* meaning "for," and *fleche* meaning "arrow," for the quiver was also made of rawhide.

Parfleches were primarily used for the transportation and storage of food, but were also used to store articles of clothing. They quite often were made in pairs, with holes burnt in the edges and rawhide cords inserted so that they could be slung across a saddle.

The preparation of the skin, construction and painting of the *parfleche* were the job of a woman. She first selected a buffalo hide, fleshed it to an even thickness, and removed the hair. The removal of the hair was achieved by soaking the hide in a mixture of water and wood ashes or some other natural alkali. After soaking in this solution for a few days, the hide was staked out on the ground and the hair removed by scraping with sharp rock or a special tool made from an antler. After the hair was removed, she cut the skin to the required shape, folded it and set it aside with a weight placed upon it to dry.

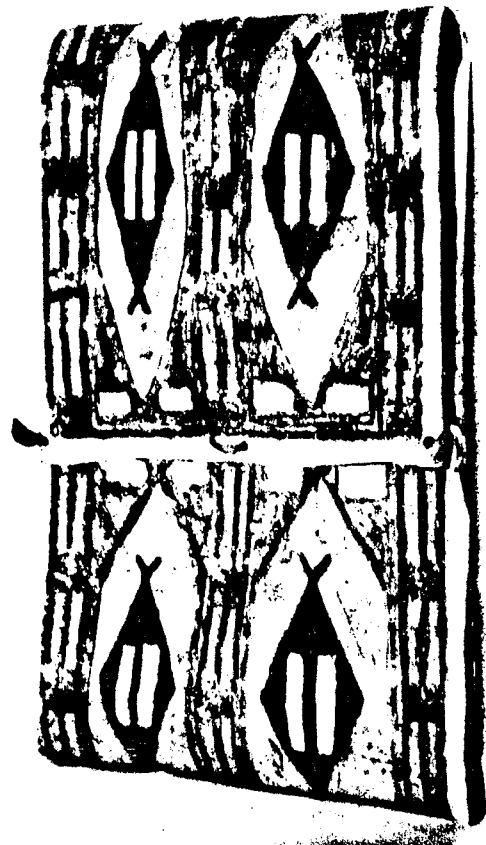


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Figure 2. Old Sioux *Parfleche* made by Mrs. Spotted Horn Bull. Ken Kinkade Collection.

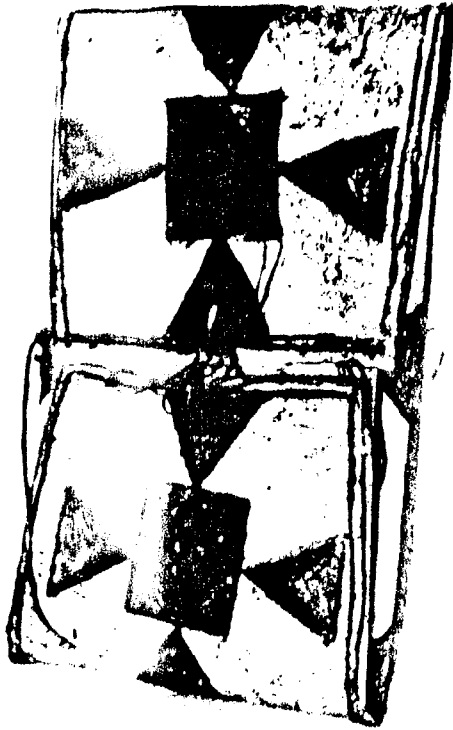


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Figure 3. Photograph of another Sioux Parfleche. Ken Kinkade Collection.

The next step was to paint her design. Paints were acquired through many sources, from different colored earth, certain plants, and animal matter. The paint was mixed in hot water, which sank into the skin and became permanent when dry. To make the paint waterproof, a transparent glue made from the underscrapings of the hide, or by boiling the tail of a beaver, was applied to the painted areas. She first painted the outline of her design with a sharpened piece of wood or piece of horn. Sometimes peeled willow sticks of different lengths were used as guides. She then filled in the solid areas of her design, using a piece of porous buffalo leg bone as a brush.

A parfleche would be a very practical and authentic container for you to store and carry your costume in. If you cannot acquire a piece of rawhide large enough, a large piece of canvas can be substituted. You can paint your design with enamel. The usual colors are red, yellow, green and black.

Please Note:

The preparation of the hide and painting of the parfleche varied somewhat from tribe to tribe, thus the methods described in this article are generalizations.

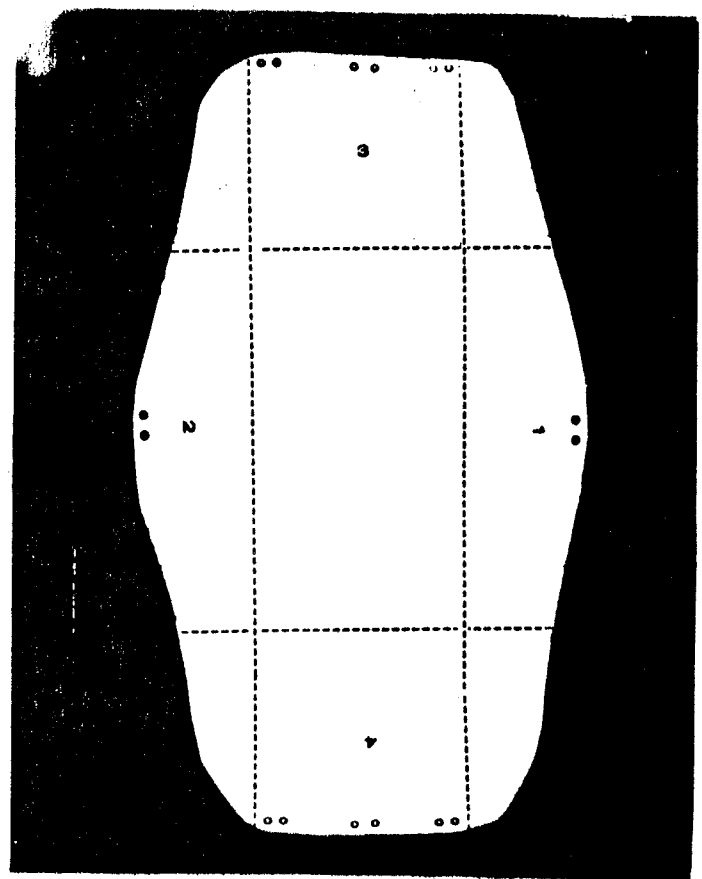


Figure 4. Pattern showing order of folding.



Notes From The Moccasin Telegraph

an early date. Unfortunately first class mailing proves to be much too expensive, so we have come up with another alternative, early mailing. Our new plan is to mail your issue one month earlier than we are mailing it now. In other words the January issue will be mailed on November 26th. In this way you should receive it by the end of December, insuring that you will receive all the dates of the January celebration in time for you to attend.

In order to accomplish this feat we will have to make a change in the deadline date. This change will become effective with the January issue. Therefore, the new deadline for all material in the January issue will be November 15th. Any material received after this date will not be run. I hope that you will all remember this new date and send in your powwow dates early. I am sure that everyone will benefit from this new mailing date.

THE INDIAN T tipi

bags and cases and drumheads use calf or yearling hide.

1. Soak the hide in water, preferably warm, a day or more, until thoroughly soft.

2. On a flat, level piece of ground, stake out the hide, flesh side up. Use stakes every 10 or 12 inches. Work from opposite points, a stake on one side, then one on the opposite side.

3. In recent times fleshers have been made of old gun barrels. Previously they were made from a leg bone of elk or buffalo. Make yours of a piece of strap or band iron. For comfort in handling, set it in a wooden handle. Use the heaviest wood you can get, for the heavier the flesher the better it works. That is why the flattened gun barrels were so good. The handle should be covered with wet rawhide and sewn up but, since you do not have any rawhide yet, you may have to use adhesive tape, or something of the kind, temporarily. Using this flesher, held in the position shown in the drawing (Fig. 14), scrape and hack off all fat and excess tissue. This is hard, back-breaking work, but just think of the beautiful things you can make of that finished rawhide!

4. When you are satisfied that the hide is smooth and clean, wash it thoroughly with yellow soap. (Indians used soap made from yucca roots, sometimes called soapweed.) Do this several times and rinse by pouring fresh water over it. Indians sometimes used the top cut from a tin can as a scraper to work the soap thoroughly into the hide. Stub-born bits of tissue can be removed, and soiled spots, spots where dirt has been ground into the hide, can be cleaned with this scraper. Allow the hide to dry and bleach in the sun a couple of days.

Living in the Tipi

It is important that all fat and grease have been removed!

5. If the hide is a heavy one, you need only pull up the stakes and run it over to take the hair off. If it is light, it will need soaking again and restaking, hair side up, as it will buckle under the hide-scraper otherwise. Be sure there are no stones, sticks, or other irregularities under the hide.

6. Remove the hair with the scraper, called *rudpinka* by the Lakota. This is really an adze and is used with both hands in a sort of sidewise movement. The Indian ones were made of elk antler. You can get the same effect by making one of band iron, similar to the flesher, but bent at a right angle. The blade should be of good steel and very sharp. Traders used to sell the Indians iron blades, but they weren't nearly as good as steel ones and wore out quickly, encouraging the sale of new ones. You will have to touch up this blade occasionally as you work. For a few times all you have to do is stroke off the burr with the back of a table knife. But sometimes you will have to sharpen it thoroughly with a file and whetstone. If your tool is good and sharp, removing the hair is not difficult.

7. To finish the rawhide and make it really Indian-like, you have still one more process. Indian rawhide is not horry and yellow, like what we usually think of as rawhide. It is creamy white, opaque, and pliable, almost like alum-tanned leather.

THE INDIAN TAPI

Remove the stakes, keeping the hide hair side up, and lay it on a thick mat of rugs or papers. The mat should be firm, not too soft. Indians used old skins for theirs. Use a full-sized axe, one which has the back rounded rather than sharply squared. It has been reported that the whitening is done by pounding, but you could pound the rawhide from now till doomsday and never get it white and soft. Here comes the little trick that no one has explained before. The "pounding" consists of using short, glancing blows (see Fig. 14) with the back of the axe. These blows must be overlapped, so that every square inch of the hide is covered, just like planishing a bowl in metalworking. Before you get through with this job, you will probably wish you had never heard of Indian rawhide, but the results should be worth all you have put into it. You will have a beautiful material from which you can make many fine craft articles. If you can stake out a raw hide during weather when nights are frosty, you will find that a few nights of frost on the damp hide will whiten it and give it a similar texture to that of the pounding, thus saving a lot of hard work.

The best paint brushes for working on rawhide and leather are made from the spongy bone of a beef joint. Next time you have a soup bone with the big knuckle joint, save it. Boil it until it is perfectly white and clean. A little household cleanser in the water will clean it faster.

1. After it is thoroughly dry, split the joint into small pieces with a sharp hand axe. *Be careful*, for it is easy to glance off of it! With a sharp jackknife shape the pieces like the "brushes" in the drawing (Fig. 14). Keep the pores of the bone as perpendicular as possible. They suck up the paint and act almost like a fountain pen. By using these brushes edgewise, you can get a very fine line. By turning them the wide way, you get a wide line. They work just like artists' lettering pens. You can make similar brushes of willow sticks, but they are not as good because they do not soak up the paint. You have to dip them constantly. You should have at least one brush for each color.

2. You can use tempera paints as the best substitute for old-time Indian paints. The casein tempera paints are still better, for they are water resistant when dry. Indians mixed powdered pigments with water and a little glue made by boiling the tendons of a buffalo or beef leg. The Crows molded the paint into little flat, round cakes, and drew with the edges of these cakes, as well as

LIVING IN THE TAPI

with the bone brushes. They added a little sugar when mixing the paint for the cakes.

3. Indians painted the hide after step 4 in making Indian rawhide, while it was still damp. Staked out flat this way, and quite hard and firm, it was almost like drawing on a table. Pretty Shield had us cut a number of straight willow sticks to be used as rulers. She insisted we use them, even though each of us can make straight lines without a ruler. She planned a whole design by laying these sticks to form the patterns.

Lay the entire hide out for the various articles to be cut from it and paint them all at the same time, before cutting them out. Work the paint right into the tissue with the bone or wooden brushes. No white man's brush will do this job properly.

4. After the paint and the hide were thoroughly dry, Indians went over the designs with the juice of the prickly pear cactus. The spines were cut off, the cactus split in two, and each half used as a sort of sponge, lightly patted on the surface, giving it a thin coat of "varnish." The easiest way to get the same results is to go over the design with a rubbed-effect or dull-finish varnish, thinned about 50/50 with turpentine. Indian rawhide designs should not be glossy. The designs should be of the same texture as the hide itself to have the charm of real Indian work.

5. After hide, paint, and varnish have dried, then the Indians turned the hide over, took the hair off, and whitened the hide with the beating process. But we have found that the rest of us poor mortals, who lack the years of experience and tradition of the Indian artist, get better results by doing the painting *after* the rawhide is fully made. After finishing step No. 7 of making rawhide, cut out the article you intend to make, dampen it slightly with water, but not enough to allow it to get soft and rubbery and out of shape, and apply your designs on the flesh side. If you run into a rough spot, one where you discover you didn't get all the excess tissue removed, use the top-of-the-bin-can scraper. Work over the spot, then wet it again and smooth it down with your fingers. After the paints have dried, varnish, as directed above.

The same bone brushes used for painting rawhide are best for painting tanned leather. First, incise the design in the leather with a bone outlining tool or a nut pick, then apply the color with the "brush." When the color has dried, go over it with glue made from a tendon. The glue can be applied with another "brush." Dried com-

Fig. 10. *Parfleches, or Indian suitcases.*

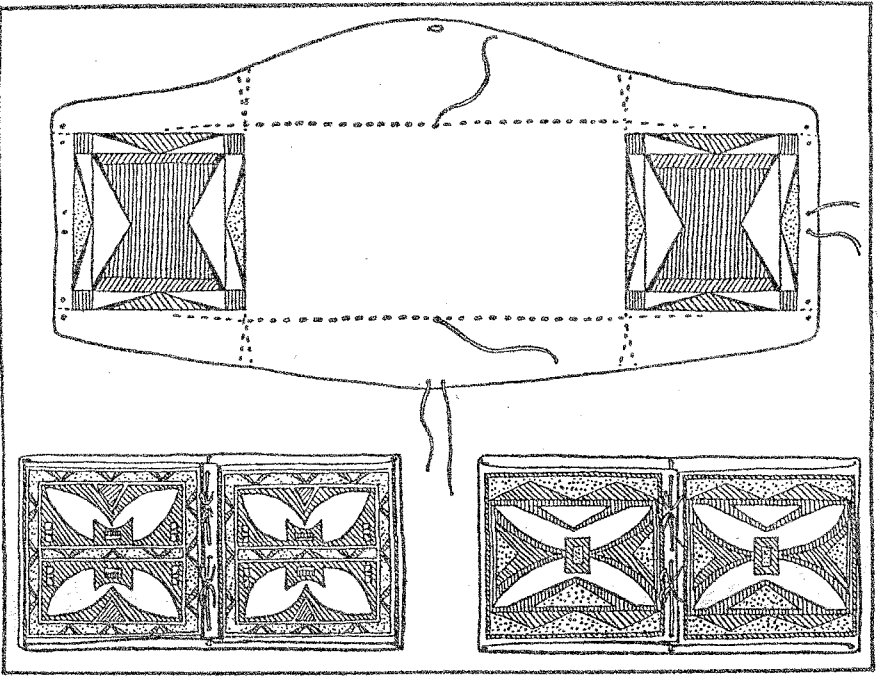
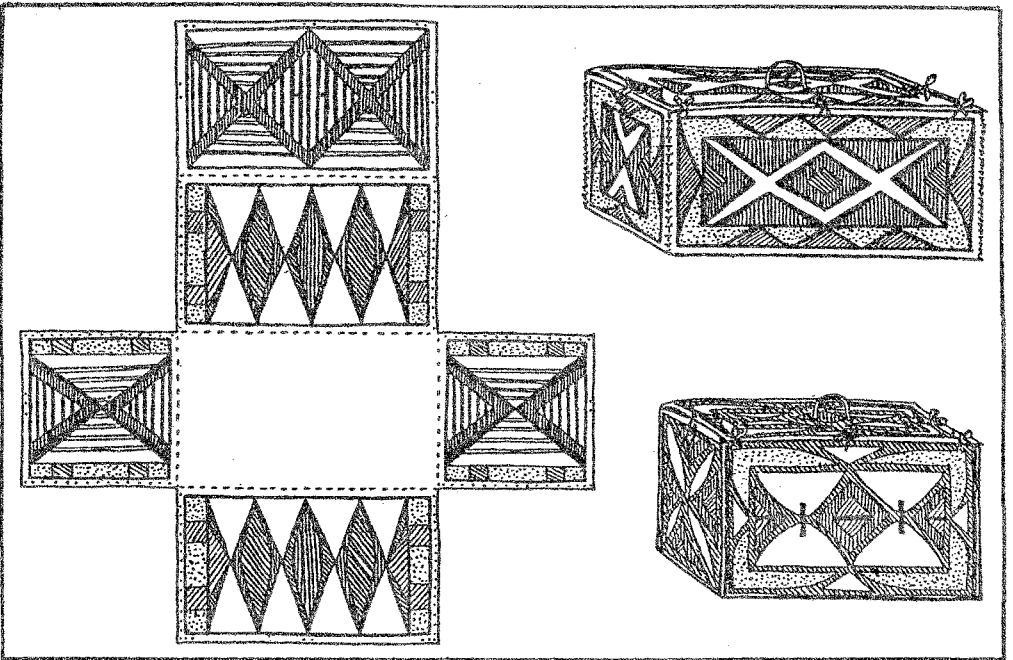


Fig. 11. *Sioux Boxes.* (See color key, Fig. 30, p. 190.)



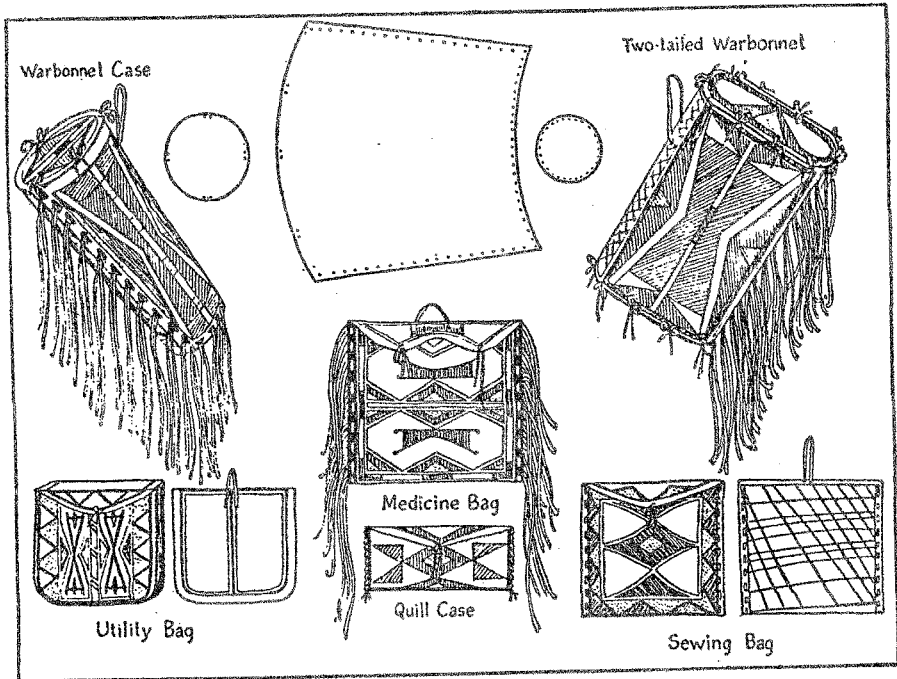


Fig. 13. Beaded Bags.

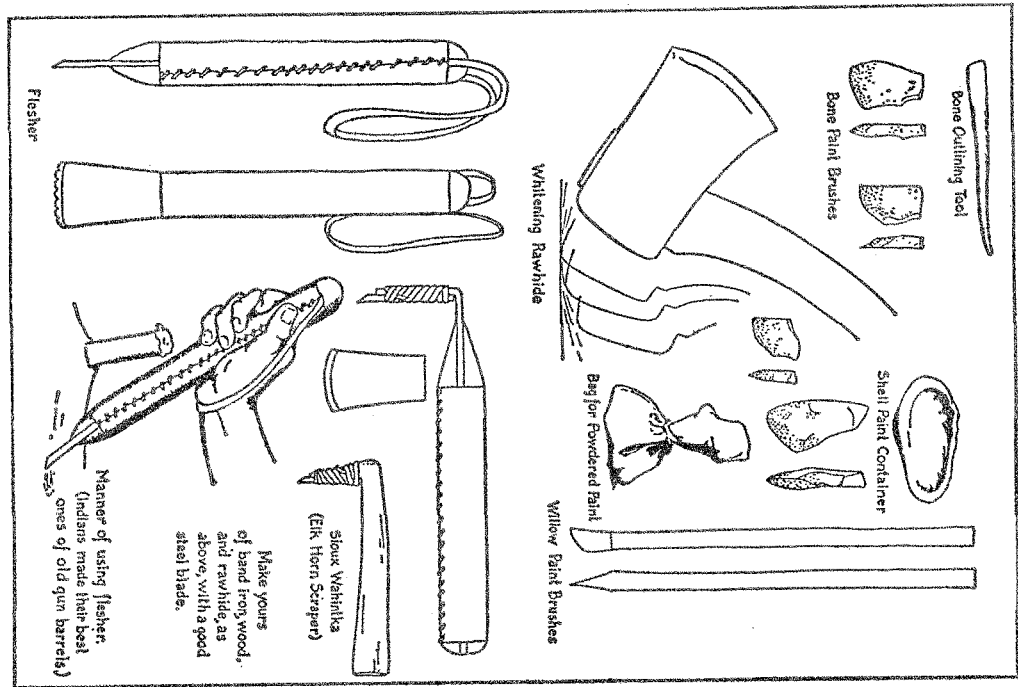


Fig. 14. Rawhide-making Tools.