

Pemmican

The early Assiniboine people were known for their production of dried meat and grease. Those two products were the Assiniboines' major trade goods at the Mandan trade center. As soon as the early French fur traders expanded their efforts onto the northern Great Plains, they became dependent upon the dried meat and grease of the Assiniboines. There are many written accounts of the Assiniboine production of these necessities of the wilderness. Some even went so far as to state that the western Canadian fur trade depended on that pemmican provided by the Assiniboines and Crees.

Assiniboines were paddling their heavily laden canoes down the river that led to the Hudson's Bay shortly after the English established their posts there in the 1600s, bringing to the early white men furs, grease, and dried meat. The La Verendryes, the first whites onto the northern Great Plains of Canada, sought the Assiniboines' dried meat and grease to supply their forts. Pemmican, a mixture of dried meat and cherries, or berries, was a staple of Northern Plains tribes. Rich in calories, the mixture could sustain a hard-working trapper, canoeist, or explorer in the cold Northern climate of the Great Plains. In fact, a pound of pemmican was equal in food value to 4 pounds of meat.

Typically, the women would cut the buffalo meat into slabs 1/4-inch thick, 2 feet wide, and 4 feet long, and hang the strips on racks of poles. In a couple of days, given good sun, the meat was dried. It was then baled and tied with Buffalo sinew. When pemmican was to be made, some of the strips of dried meat were placed on a hide, flailed with sticks until shredded, and thoroughly mixed with hot tallow or Buffalo fat. Marrow fat and berries, if available, were sometimes added, and the mixture was poured hot into Buffalo hide bags holding about a hundred pounds, which compressed as it cooled, and the bags sewn shut. After cooling completely, the pemmican was so hard that a sharp blow was necessary to break off a fragment. It was eaten cold or used with vegetables or roots in a stew. Joseph Kinsley Howard, in his book *Strange Empire*, states: "Properly cared for in cool, Airy Place, pemmican kept for years. With berries it was a tasty dish; without them, it was dull in flavor and unappetizing in appearance, but nutritious..."