

A Very Brief Description of  
Algonquin Material Culture\*

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\*For fully illustrated version, see Booklets in Algonquin Loan Box

## THE ALGONQUINS

Indians were the first inhabitants of what we now call New England. They were divided into many groups called tribes. Although they did not all live together or know each other, they are all called Algonquin Indians because they spoke Algonquin languages and lived in similar ways.

The Algonquins used the resources that they found around them, on the coast, in the forests, and in fresh waters to keep themselves well and comfortable. Without the conveniences of the 20th century, they led full lives.

### Villages

The Algonquins lived mostly in villages, in dome-shaped houses called wigwams. They often moved their houses from place to place, seeking food.

In the summer, they set up their villages along the shore where they fished and planted gardens. In winter, the villagers moved inland to more protected forest areas. In spring and fall, groups of two or three families moved their homes again, this time to hunting or fresh water fishing camps. Whenever available, the women gathered wild fruits and vegetables.

### Algonquins Today

In the 17th century, due to European contact, and then settlement, this way of life was gradually destroyed.

Today most surviving Algonquin Indians live very much like other 20th century Americans. Some Algonquins still live on reservations -- land set aside for them by the government. Since it is difficult to find work on the reservations many Indians spend their time making Indian souvenirs for tourists who visit the reservation. A few Algonquins still try to perform the ancient ceremonies and wear the tribal dress of their forefathers. But there are fewer and fewer Indians who remember.

## FISHING

The Indians fished in both fresh and salt water and depended on fish for a good portion of their food supply. The "catch" and fishing methods varied according to when and where they fished.

### Spring Fishing

In Spring, when certain fish ran up fresh water streams from the sea, the Indians trapped salmon, trout, herring, bass and sturgeon. They caught them by blocking the stream with stone, brush or wood fences through which fish could not pass. The fish would not turn back, and the Indians shot the trapped fish with bow and arrows, or spears.

The Indians also caught fish in gill nets stretched across narrow points in the stream.

### Summer Fishing

In the summer, as they were camped along the shore, the Indians caught some of the same fish, but changed their fishing methods. They used a V-shaped bone fish hook attached to a hemp fibre line to catch bass and cod. Indians also fished for sturgeon at night. They attracted the sturgeon to the water's surface with flaming torches, and then speared them.

### Winter Fishing

In winter, on ponds or streams, the Indians cut holes in the ice and fished with hook and line for perch and pickerel.

## HUNTING

The Indian hunted in the forest for such animals as deer, rabbit and turkey. These animals provided meat for food; skins for clothing; sinew for thread; beaks, claws, feathers, and teeth for decoration; bones for tools; and fat for body covering.

### Conservation

The Indian was always careful not to kill more than he needed. He believed that an animal had a spirit that continued to live even after its body died. The Indian felt that this spirit would be offended if its body were not well used. He gave this spirit a gift of tobacco to thank it for the use of its body.

### Hunting Methods: Tracking and Trapping

The Indians knew animal habits and were able to hunt animals in several ways. The Indian hunter often tracked an animal and killed it with his bow and arrow.

He also caught animals in traps set up along animal trails. One type of trap, called a deadfall, was built of heavy logs balanced on a baited stick. When the animal ate the bait, he upset the balance, and the heavy logs fell on him.

Another trap called a snare was made by bending a springy young tree over, attaching a noose to it, and lightly tying the tree in place. Acorns were then scattered on the ground, near the noose. As the animal ate the bait, he walked into the noose -- the tie came undone -- the tree sprung back -- the animal was caught in the noose -- lifted up and left hanging in the air until the Indian came, killed him and took the body down.

## FOODS

### Collecting

The Indian women collected foods such as nuts, berries, shellfish and roots to provide a varied diet and to assure a good supply when there were no garden vegetables and the hunting was poor. The women had to search in many places for these foods.

Along the coast, they picked up oysters, crabs and dug for clams. Walnuts, acorns, chestnuts and mushrooms were gathered in the forest. In natural clearings, they found blueberries and arrowroot. Swampy areas provided cranberries and waterlily root.

### Food Preparation

Food was eaten in a variety of ways. Fresh meat and fish could be roasted on sticks set next to the fire. Corn kernels, ground into meal, could be mixed with berries and baked into bread. Dried vegetables, roots, fresh fish and corn meal might all be mixed together and stewed in a large clay pot.

### Food Preservation

The Indians either preserved and stored food for future use or cooked and ate it right away. Stored foods had to be dried first so that they would not rot. Fruit and vegetables such as corn and beans, peeled pumpkins, berries and mushrooms were dried in the sun until they became hard. Cleaned whole fish, strips of meat, and shelled fish like oysters and lobsters were dried by smoking over a low fire.

## GARDENING

### Spring

In the spring the Indian women prepared and planted their gardens. To start a garden, trees were cut down, undergrowth was broken up with a digging stick, and large stones were removed. Then several varieties of corn, beans, and squash were planted. To best use the clearing, the corn, beans and squash were planted together in a single hill. The beans used the tall cornstalk as a climbing pole and the squash grew along the ground in between the hills.

### Summer

During the growing season weeds were chopped down with a clamshell hoe. Children chased the crows and other birds away. They did not kill the crow because the Indians believed that in the time of the first Indian people, it was the crow that had brought the corn and bean seeds to the Indians.

### Fall

In the fall before the vegetables were harvested, dried and put away for winter use, the Indians held feasts thanking the supernaturals for allowing their corn to grow.

### Tobacco

In a separate garden the men grew tobacco. Tobacco was smoked among friends for relaxation, but it had a more important religious use. It was offered as a gift of thanks to those supernaturals and animal spirits that had provided food or assistance to the Indian.

## THE WIGWAM

### The Framework

The Indians built and furnished their wigwams with materials which they found near their village. They chopped down young trees with stone axes to build a framework for the wigwam. The trees were sunk into the ground in a circle, bent over to form a rounded roof, tied together with the rope made from the inner stem of the hemp plant. Mats made from cattail leaves or sheets of elm, birch or chestnut bark covered the framework.

### The Interior

Inside the wigwam, mats woven from bullrushes decorated the walls. Low platforms were used for both seats and beds. The platforms were padded with moss, mats and fur to make them comfortable. The Indians stored most of their belongings and food inside the wigwam in baskets and bags. Food and equipment were also hung on the interior framework.

### Cooking Area

In the center of the wigwam there was a cooking area. Wooden bowls and spoons, shell dishes, a birchbark water bucket, a mortar and pestle for grinding corn into meal might be placed nearby.

### Household Containers

The Indians used wood, skin, bark and plant fibres to make their storage containers. Strips of wood were woven into baskets. Stems of fibrous plants were made into net-like bags. Pouches were made from animal skins and sometimes decorated with porcupine quill or moosehair embroidery. Birchbark was folded in different shapes and sewn with spruce root and formed into dishes and buckets.

## MAKING CLOTHING

Animal skins were often made into clothing. Before a skin could be used, it had to be cleaned, softened and, usually smoked.

### Cleaning Skins

After the animal was skinned, the hide was stretched on a frame to dry. It was then easier to scrape the fat, blood and tissue off the skin. If the skin were not scraped clean, it would rot. The broad edge of a stone scraper was pulled along the skin to scrape it clean.

### Softening Skins

After the skin side was clean, the hair was scraped off. The skin was still quite stiff. Before the Indian woman used it for clothing, she softened it by rubbing fat into it, or by pulling and twisting it back and forth.

### Smoking Skins

Most skins were smoked before they were used. Smoking made the skin more durable (it dried soft and smooth even after getting wet) and improved its appearance.

To smoke a skin, the Indians made a cone shaped bag of skin, and hung it over a low, smudge fire. As the smoke from the fire filled up the bag, it discolored the skin. Skins could be smoked until they were yellow, tan or brown. The longer the skin was left over the smudge fire, the deeper its color became.

### Patterning

When the skin was ready, the Indian woman cut it into patterns for clothing. A loincloth, a belt and a skirt needed no sewing at all. They were simply cut to the right shape with a stone knife. Leggings were also cut from one piece of skin which was then folded over and joined at the seam. Moccasins were made from only one piece of skin, joined to itself at the heel and toe.

### Sewing

Seams were sewn together with an awl (a sharp pointed bone tool) and deer sinew (long stringy tendon which connects muscles to bone). Since a needle would not have been strong enough to go through 2 thicknesses of leather, the Indians punched holes in the leather skin with the awl and then laced the sinew through the holes, joining the two sides.



## DRESS

### Clothing

The Indian men and women wore the same simple clothing: It consisted of a loincloth, a pair of leggings, and moccasins. When it was cold, the men also wore a fur robe over one shoulder, and a fur sleeve made of a whole animal skin over the other arm. In winter, the women wore a wrap-around skirt over their loincloth, and a skin poncho over their shoulders.

Babies were simply wrapped in soft furs and carried in a cradleboard on their mother's back.

### Grease

Both men and women wore a thick coating of grease which protected their skin in winter and served as an insect repellent in the summer.

### Paint

On festive and ceremonial occasions, the Indians decorated themselves with paint. It was made from ground-up minerals -- hematite for red, limonite for yellow, and coal or charcoal for black. These were ground in a stone mortar and then mixed with grease. The designs that the Indians painted on their faces and bodies probably represented their family or tribe. When they went to war the men also covered their faces with paint to frighten the enemy and to help conceal their own identity.

### Ornaments

The Indians wore many ornaments. Feathers or foxes tails could be tied into a hairdo. Bracelets, necklaces, headbands and ear-pendants were common.

Such jewelry was made from a wide variety of natural materials including, whole birds, bird beaks, animal and bird claws, deer hooves, small bones, stones and shells. Beads of stone, bone or shell were ground into shape with sandstone. Then holes were drilled in the center of the beads by rotating a small hand-held stone drill.

READ UP THIS SIDE

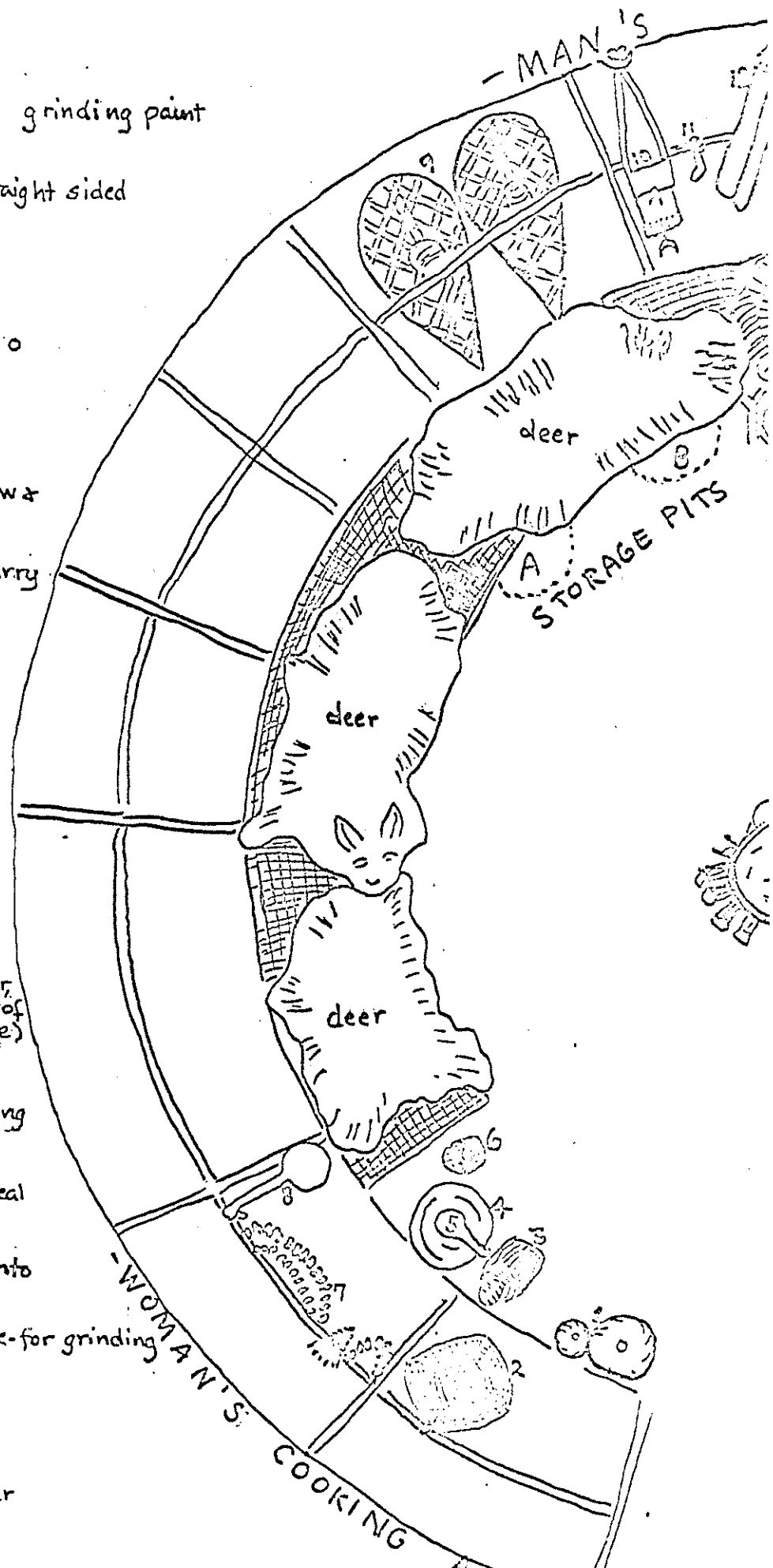
- 18. axe - tool & weapon
- 17. stone mortar & pestle for grinding paint
- 16. sandstone sanders in straight sided wooden bowl
- 15. war club
- 14. squirrel pouch for tobacco
- 13. bark drinking cup
- 12. quiver with sections for bow & for arrow
- 11. wooden spoon - ridged to carry on belt
- 10. noikake sack - for carrying parched corn meal when hunting
- 9. snowshoes

MAN'S AREA

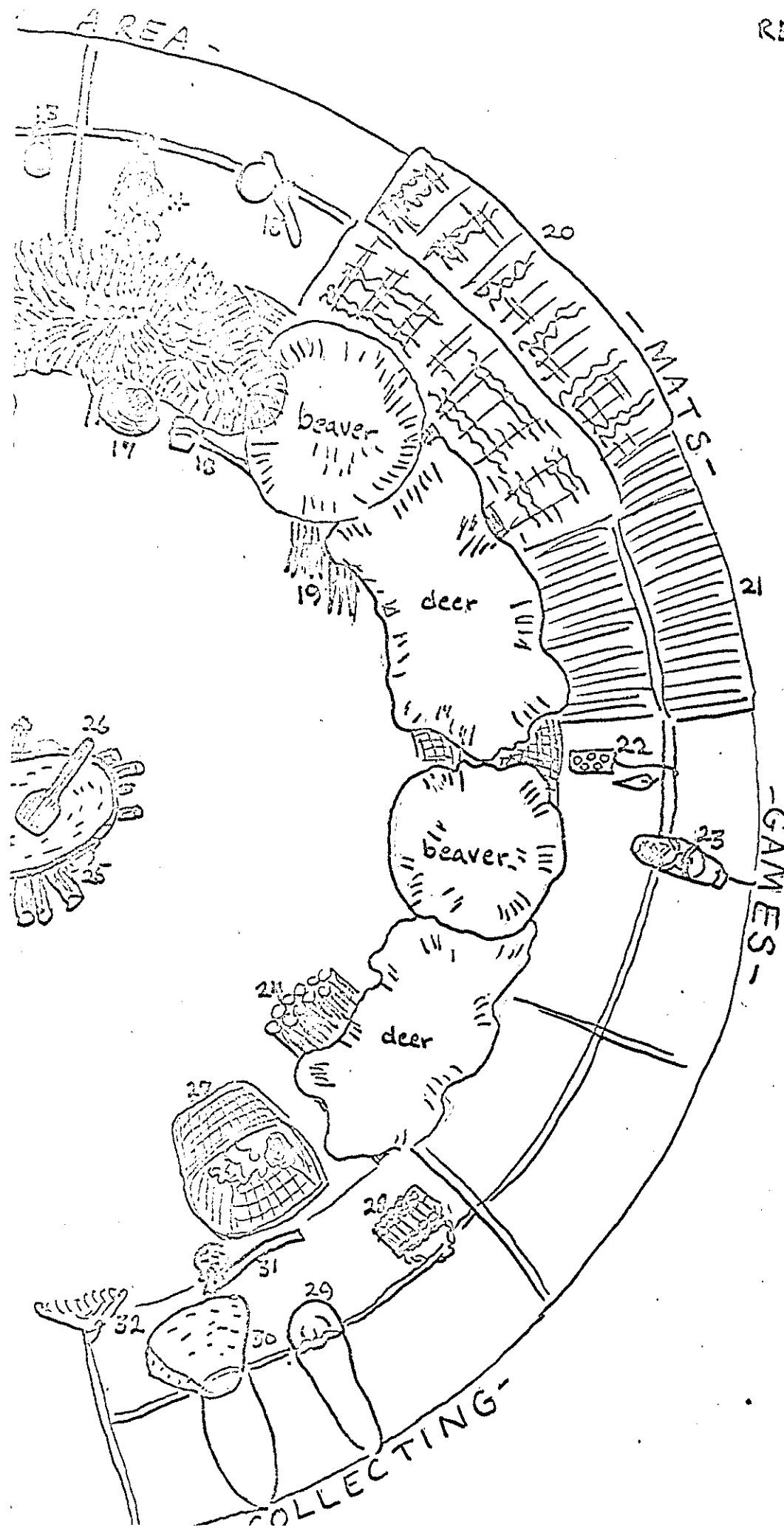
- 8. wooden ladle
- 7. dried foods - mushroom, oyster, water lily root, pumpkin, ears of popping corn (these change)
- 6. corn husk basket - for holding corn kernels
- 5. wooden spoon - to put corn meal into pot on fire
- 4. wooden bowl - to sift corn into
- 3. wooden mortar & stone pestle - for grinding corn

- 2. strainer
- 1. nutcracker - base and pounder

WOMAN'S COOKING AREA



WIGWAM



MATS

19. bundles of bulrushes for mending mats

20. bulrush mats - interior

21. cat tail mats - exterior

GAMES

22. ring + pin

23. toy papoose

FIREPLACE

24. pile of firewood

25. fireplace - 4 stones (to support pot) + wood

26. birch bark pot + wooden paddle for stirring

COLLECTING

27. basket of fur scraps + maple burls for carv. bowls

28. fibre bag

29. horse shoe crab basket

30. birch bark water bucket

31. clam shell hoe

32. duck wing broom

STORAGE PITS

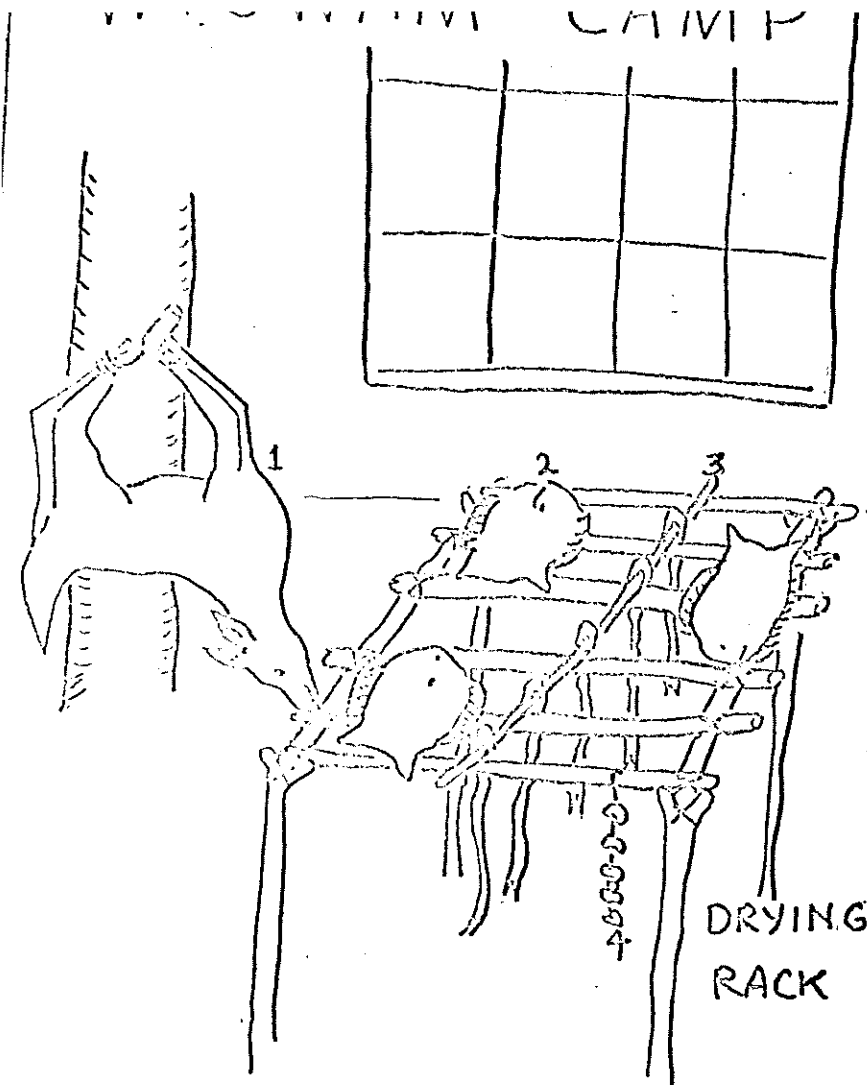
A. belongs to school programs  
KEEP OUT

B. artifacts for special use

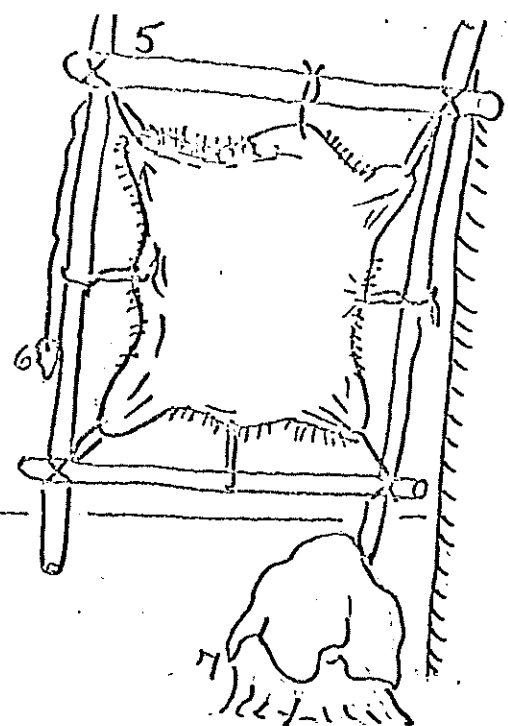
poncho & necklace to be worn by staff

bead + tool blanks to be shaped on sanders

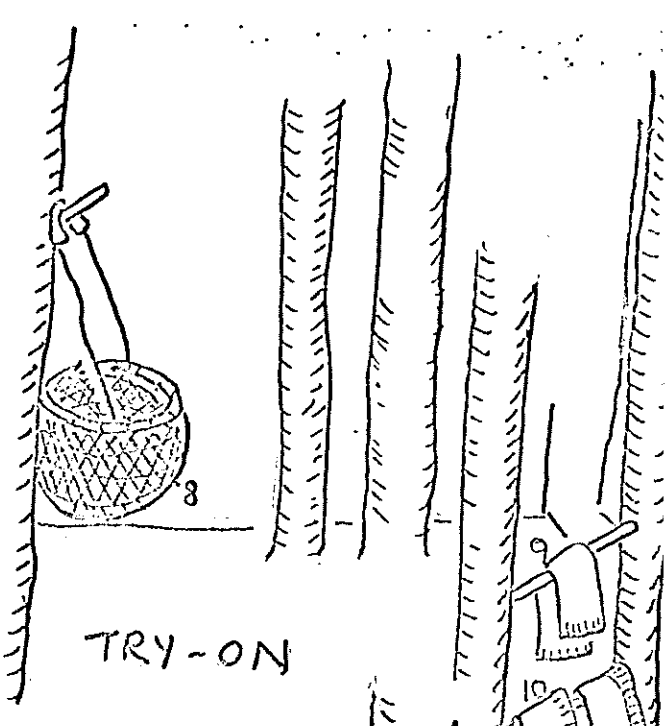
twine + knife - for mending



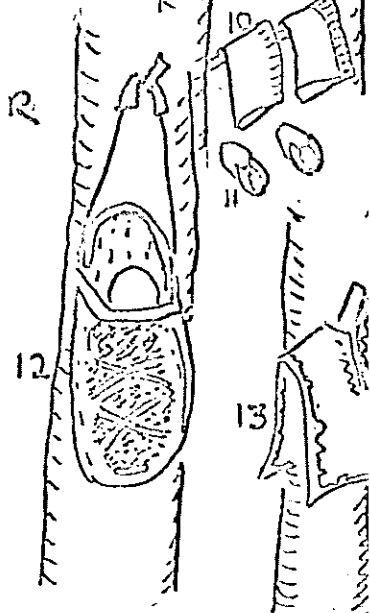
- DRYING RACK
- 1. deer
  - 2. codfish
  - 3. eels strung on a stick
  - 4. oysters



- CLEANING SKINS
- 5. deerskin stretched on scraping rack
  - 6. scraper for cleaning hide
  - 7. Indian tanned finished hide



- TRY-ON CORNER
- 8. backpack + carrying strap
  - 9. loincloth
  - 10. leggings
  - 11. moccasins
  - 12. amulet board + carrying strap
- boy's clothing



- 14. mortar + pestle for grinding corn

