



BAGS AND POUCHES

One of the universal characteristics among Native American nations is the making of bags and pouches. While we generally associate this practice with the Plains tribes, Indian bag-making is just as prominent among the settled agricultural tribes like the Cherokee and the Navajo. A leather bag is much better suited for carrying certain items – sewing tools and fetishes, for example – than a pot or a basket.

Native American bags were sized and shaped to hold a specific object. There were two types of pouches: soft pouches and *parfleches*. Soft pouches were made from tanned animal hides, while *parfleches* were made from stiff rawhide. Regardless of the type, pouches and bags were decorated. Women were the principal makers and designers of bags and pouches. They utilized paint made from locally available plants, or beads, or quills or a combination of any and all, according to their particular tribal tradition. The design incorporated the object into the realm of Native American culture, regardless of its purpose.

The passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830 began the systematized removal of Native Americans from their traditional lands located east of the Mississippi River to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) west of the Mississippi. This process was expanded to include all Native American nations in 1851 with the passage of the Indian Appropriations Act. This law authorized the creation of “Indian Reservations.” The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which had managed treaties and relations with Native Americans since 1824, was directed to provide for their care. This included issuing rations of food, clothing and “essentials.” In order to manage this system, the BIA issued ration cards to heads of households who would then present the card when they received their weekly or monthly allotment. The ration card, thus, became a symbol of the end of a nomadic, self-sufficient life, and the acceptance of a sedentary and dependent existence.

The shift from a nomadic to a sedentary life was traumatic for many. One of the ways Native Americans chose to adjust to their new life was to combine the “new ways” with the “old ways.” We see this especially in the form of ration ticket pouches, made specifically for carrying and protecting the item that guaranteed survival in their new environment. Leather, usually cowhide, pouches, decorated with traditional beaded patterns, carried the ration cards to the trading post on ration day. Making the ration card pouch was not a requirement. This small, voluntary act can be interpreted as one attempt to reconcile the new way of life with the old.

All cultures adapt to change. The leather ration card pouch is an excellent Southwestern example of that process.