

A Day in De Smet: A "Little Town on the Prairie" Experience

Materials Needed

- **For Setting the Scene:** A copy of a *Little House* book, preferably *Little Town on the Prairie* or *The Long Winter*.
- **For Pioneer Sewing:**
 - A 6x6 inch square of plain, light-colored fabric (like cotton or muslin).
 - An assortment of old buttons.
 - A needle with a large eye (a tapestry or embroidery needle works well).
 - Embroidery floss or thick thread in various colors.
 - Scissors.
 - (Optional alternative: Fabric glue for a no-sew version).
- **For Butter Making:**
 - A small, clean glass jar with a tight-fitting lid (like a baby food jar or small mason jar).
 - Heavy whipping cream (enough to fill the jar halfway).
 - A pinch of salt.
 - A small bowl and a knife/spatula.
 - Crackers or a slice of bread for tasting.
- **For Journaling:**
 - A notebook or several pieces of paper.
 - A pencil or pen.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, Kiddo 1 will be able to:

- Demonstrate a basic sewing skill (threading a needle and making simple stitches) to create a craft.
- Explain the process of making butter by hand and connect it to the daily chores of pioneer life.
- Use descriptive language to write a short journal entry from the perspective of a child in the 1880s.
- Identify at least two ways pioneer life was different from modern life based on the day's activities.

Curriculum Connections

- **History/Social Studies:** Understanding daily life, challenges, and resourcefulness of American pioneers in the late 19th century.
- **Practical Life Skills & Fine Arts:** Developing fine motor skills through sewing and experiencing historical food preparation.
- **Language Arts:** Reading comprehension, discussion, and creative/narrative writing.
- **Science:** Observing a physical change of state (liquid cream to solid butter).

Lesson Activities (Approx. 90 minutes)

Part 1: Warm-Up - A Town on the Prairie (15 minutes)

1. **Read Aloud:** Find a chapter in a *Little House* book that describes daily chores or town life. A

great example is from *Little Town on the Prairie* when Laura gets her first sewing job or when the family makes butter.

2. **Discussion:** Ask thoughtful questions to connect the reading to the activities.
 - "What jobs did Laura or Ma have to do that we don't do today?"
 - "They couldn't just go to the store for everything. Why was it important for them to know how to make and fix things themselves?"
 - "Today, we are going to try two of these important pioneer jobs: sewing to make do and churning cream into butter."

Part 2: Hands-On History - Pioneer Skills (50 minutes)

We'll do two activities that show how pioneers used what they had.

Activity A: The Button Square (25 minutes)

In the books, Ma was always mending and saving every little scrap. Buttons were precious! We're going to practice sewing by making a decorative button square.

1. **Prepare the Needle:** Demonstrate how to thread the needle with embroidery floss and tie a "stopper knot" at the end so it won't pull through the fabric.
2. **Choose a Design:** Lay out the buttons on the fabric square. Does Kiddo 1 want to make their initial, a heart, a flower, or just a random pattern? This is a chance for creative choice!
3. **Start Sewing:** Show how to push the needle up from the back of the fabric, through a buttonhole, and back down through another hole. Repeat a few times to make the button secure. Tie a knot on the back.
4. **Continue Creating:** Let Kiddo 1 continue sewing buttons onto the fabric to complete their design. The goal is practice, not perfection!

Activity B: Making Butter in a Jar (25 minutes)

Before refrigerators, making butter was a frequent and important chore. It was a way to preserve the fat from milk.

1. **Prepare the Churn:** Fill the clean glass jar halfway with heavy whipping cream. Filling it only halfway is important, as the cream needs room to move.
2. **Secure the Lid:** Screw the lid on TIGHTLY. This is a very important step!
3. **Start Shaking!** Now, shake the jar. You can do this while sitting, walking around, or even making it a game by playing music and shaking to the beat.
4. **Observe the Changes:** After about 5-7 minutes of shaking, stop and observe. You'll notice stages:
 - First, it becomes whipped cream (sloshing sound stops).
 - Keep shaking! It will get thicker.
 - Suddenly, you will hear and feel a "thump." A solid lump will separate from a thin, watery liquid. That liquid is buttermilk, and the solid is your butter!
5. **Finish the Butter:** Pour out the buttermilk (you can save it for baking!). Scrape the solid butter into a small bowl. Add a tiny pinch of salt and mix it in with a knife or spatula.
6. **Taste Test:** Spread your homemade butter on a cracker or piece of bread and enjoy the results of your hard work!

Part 3: Cool-Down - A Pioneer's Journal (25 minutes)

Now that we've worked hard like a pioneer, let's write about our day.

1. **Set the Scene:** "Imagine you are a child living in De Smet in 1881. Your name is... [Kiddo 1 can choose a pioneer name]. You don't have a TV or video games. Your day was filled with chores like the ones we just did."

2. **Writing Prompt:** Ask Kiddo 1 to write a short journal entry about their day. They can describe making the butter, how their hands felt after sewing, what they thought about the work, and what they hope to do tomorrow. Encourage them to use descriptive words (e.g., "the lumpy butter," "the sharp needle," "my tired arms from shaking the jar").
3. **Share:** If comfortable, have Kiddo 1 read their journal entry aloud.

Differentiation & Extension

For Extra Support:

- **Sewing:** If the needle and thread are too frustrating, use fabric glue to attach the buttons. The focus can be on the pattern-making and the historical concept of saving materials. Or, pre-thread the needle for them.
- **Writing:** Provide sentence starters for the journal entry, such as: "Dear Diary, Today was a busy day. First, I helped Ma by...", "My favorite chore was...", "Making butter made my arms feel..."

For an Extra Challenge:

- **Sewing:** Instead of just attaching buttons, try teaching a simple running stitch or backstitch to create a border around the fabric square before adding the buttons.
- **Butter Math:** Research how much cream would have cost in the 1880s. How much butter does our cream yield? Calculate the "value" of the butter you made.
- **Writing:** Expand the journal entry into a short story that includes a problem. For example, "We were almost out of thread, so I had to..." or "While I was churning the butter, my little brother almost knocked over the jar!"

Assessment: Checking Our Pioneer Skills

Assessment for this lesson is informal and based on observation and the finished products.

- **Observation Checklist:**
 - Did Kiddo 1 actively participate in the discussion?
 - Did they successfully follow the steps for making butter?
 - Were they able to handle the sewing materials and complete a few stitches (or the alternative)?
- **Product Review:**
 - **Button Square:** Is there a clear attempt at a design? Are the buttons attached? (Focus on effort, not perfection).
 - **Butter:** Did the cream successfully turn into butter?
- **Journal Entry Review:**
 - Does the entry include at least one detail from the day's activities?
 - Does it reflect a pioneer perspective (e.g., talks about chores, lack of modern items)?
 - Is there an attempt to use descriptive words?