



## ELP and ESP Station Handout

### Corn Husk Dolls

#### INTRODUCTION

This handout will give you historical background of corn husk dolls and show you how to make the dolls. Through the Corn Husk Doll station, your students will learn how to make their own corn husk doll. They will also learn how both early American and Native American children entertained themselves by making simple toys and get the opportunity to compare and contrast toys and entertainment of the past with those of the present day.

#### HISTORY

While California Indians did not cultivate corn until it was introduced by the Spanish, many other Native American tribes throughout the U.S. did harvest and consume corn. They would use the husks from the corn to make a variety of items including dolls. Early Americans adopted this practice and corn husk dolls became common toys throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pioneer children would bring the dolls westward with them or make corn husk dolls once they reached California. Corn husk dolls are a good example of how the settlers found pleasure in the simple things in life such as homemade toys.

#### Story of the Corn Husk Doll

The following is a story told by the Seneca people, a Native American tribe from the Northeastern region of the United States. The story was printed in a book entitled *Our Mother Corn*. A full works cited entry for this book follows the story. A PDF version of the book can also be found online at the following website: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED220235.pdf>.

Many, many years ago, the corn, one of the Three Sisters, wanted to make something different. She made the moccasin and the salt boxes, the mats, and the face. She wanted to do something different so the Great Spirit gave her permission. So she made the little people out of corn husk and they were to roam the earth so that they would bring brotherhood and contentment to the Iroquois tribe. But she made one that was very, very beautiful. This beautiful corn person, you might call her, went into the woods and saw herself in a pool. She saw how beautiful she was and she became very vain and naughty. That began to make the people very unhappy and so the Great Spirit decided that wasn't what she was to do. She didn't pay attention to his warning, so the last time the messenger came and told her that she was going to have her punishment. Her punishment would be that she'd have no face, she would not converse with the Senecas or the birds or the animals. She'd roam the earth forever, looking for something to do to gain her face back again. So that's why we don't put any faces on the husk dolls.\*



\*Mathers, Sherry. *Our Mother Corn*. Ed. Bill Brescia. Seattle: Daybreak Star Press, 1981. Print.





## SETTING UP THE CORN HUSK DOLL STATION

### Place

You can set up your corn husk doll station in a variety of places around the Fort. On a rainy day, Fort staff will determine the best location for you.

### Materials You Need to Bring

- Corn husks (may be purchased at Mexican Food supply markets or some supermarkets); you will need roughly 4-7 per doll
- Artificial sinew or heavy string (sinew available at the Sutter's Fort Trade Store)
- Scissors
- Cloth scraps for clothing
- Bath towels

### Materials the Fort Provides

- Metal tubs (to soak the husks in order to make them pliable)
- Table and chairs

## MAKING THE DOLLS

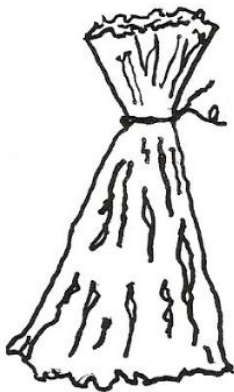
Following are two sets of directions for making corn husk dolls. The first set of instructions is slightly more detailed than the second set of directions, which is for making a more simplified doll. Following each set of directions are pictures to help you see how to make the dolls.

### Directions

1. Fill a large tub with warm water. Soak husks about 10 to 15 minutes to make them pliable. Keep the husks wet while working. Always keep the smooth side of the husks turned outside.
2. Lay the bath towels on your worktable to absorb excess water from the husks.
3. Hold 4-5 large husks together as if you were arranging them in layers.
4. Tightly tie the bundle 2 inches down from the top with strong string or sinew. Wind the string around the husks several times before you tie a knot so the husks will not fall apart.
5. Turn down the husks above the knot one by one as you would peel a banana.
6. Firmly wrap string or sinew around the husks and tie a knot about one inch from the top. The part above the sinew will be the doll's head.
7. To make arms take one husk, turn the ends inside and roll tightly. Do not make the arms thick.
8. Tie the ends and center with a string.
9. Separate the husks below the doll's head and push the arm piece between the layers under and against the head so the arms stick out at each side.
10. Roll a small strip of husk into a ball. Separate the husk layers just below the arms and fill the pocket with rolled husk.

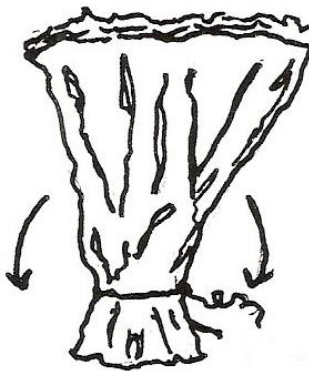


11. Close the husks around the ball and tie them securely below the ball. Now you have a chest and waistline.
12. Choose two wide cornhusk strips and drape one over each shoulder, crossing the strips in front and back.
13. Tie sinew around the waist to fasten the ends.
14. Cut a thin strip of husk about a quarter of an inch wide to cover the neck thread.
15. Tie the husk off by making a knot or tying a bow in front.
16. Bend the arms to make hands, if you wish.
17. To make a skirt, choose wide soft husks and place them with the pointed ends at the waist and the wide stem ends over the head.
18. Securely tie all the husks at the waist and turn down (toward the feet of the doll) the husk layers as you would peel a banana.
19. Trim the ends that now form the skirt's hem to make the hem even so the doll can stand.
20. To make a male doll, simply cut the lower husks in half to the waist and use sinew to tie the two pieces into bundles forming legs.
21. Use pieces of scrap cloth to make bonnets, shirt, bag, shawls, bandana, etc. Use your imagination. Corn silk can be used for hair.
22. Let dolls dry 1-2 days. Before they are completely dry, do not put them in a closed space or they will mold.



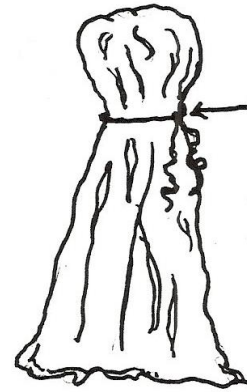
Steps 3 & 4

Lay 4 to 5 husks together and tie 2 in. down from top



Step 5

Turn husks down over tie

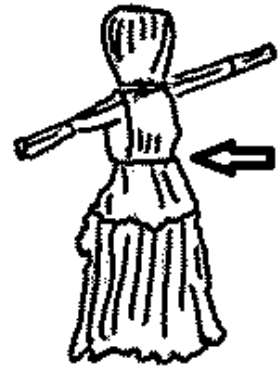


Step 6

Tie a knot about an inch from the top to form the head

Steps 7 & 8

Roll one husk tightly. Tie at the ends and the center.



Step 9

Push the arm piece between bust layers below head

Step 10

Roll a small piece of husk into a ball

Step 10

Fill pocket below arms with the ball of husk to form the chest

Step 11

Then tie the waist



Steps 12 & 13

Drape a husk over the shoulders and tie at the waist

Steps 14 & 15

Cover thread that formed neck w/ a thin strip of husk and tie into a knot or bow

Steps 17, 18 & 19

Place pointed husk ends at waist; tie, turn down and trim the ends

Step 21

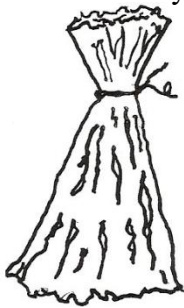
Make simple clothes, bonnets and bags

**Simplified Directions**

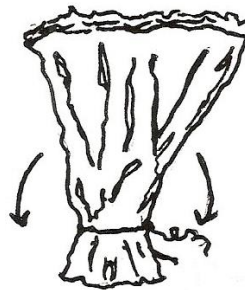
If you don't have the time or patience to make the dolls described above, following is a simpler method. The materials needed are generally the same, but you won't need as many corn husks.

1. Soak corn husks in warm water for 10 to 15 minutes. Keep moist.
2. Use 5-6 husks for 1 large body, 4 husks for a small body, 1 husk for arms. If a husk is too large you can tear it in half.

3. On a towel-draped table, place the husks in front of you making sure all narrow ends are together, on top of each other.
4. Take an 8 inch piece of artificial sinew or string and wrap it around the narrow end of the husks about 2 inches down from the top. Wrap the sinew or string twice around the husks and tie in a secure knot.
5. Turn the husks upside down, with the loose ends up.
6. Pull down one husk from one side, then one from the other as if you were peeling a banana. Do this until all husks have been pulled down.
7. Pull the husks down tightly, but not so tightly that you pull them out of the tied end.
8. With another piece of twine, tie the husks about one inch from the top to form the doll's head.
9. To make arms lay 2 corn husks in front of you. Place them on top of each other with the narrow ends opposite each other. Roll them up tightly.
10. Tie the husks (arms) in the middle with sinew or string.
11. Trim the ends evenly by folding the arm piece in half at the center and trimming the ends.
12. Choosing the smoothest side of the head for the front, lift up the loose ends of husks until you are at the center. Place the arms as far up and close to the neck as possible. With another piece of sinew tightly tie off the husks as you did before around the body to hold the arms in place.
13. To form hands, with the doll facing you fold 1/4 to 1/2 inch of arm in towards the body. Tie off securely on each side.
14. Let doll dry 1 – 2 days.



Tie 2 inches down



Turn husks down over tie



Tie 1 inch down to form head



Roll one husk tightly; tie ends, center to form arms



Divide skirt and push arms up just under head



Tie below arms to form waist