Instructions for Home-made Butter Activity

You will need:

-2 large plastic jars

-2 cartons of heavy whipping cream

-2 small bowls

-a knife

-small plastic cups with lids

**Directions**

-Fill both large plastic jars half full of heavy cream.

-Have the children form two circles. Each circle of children gets their own jar. Have each child shake the jar for about 10 seconds and pass it on.

-After about 2 minutes, the sloshing will subside and your heavy cream will now have become whipped cream.

-Continue passing and shaking the jar for about 5 more minutes. At this point you will start to hear a sloshing and a thunking noise. This is because the fats in the milk have started to clump together to form a lump of butter.

-Open the jar and pour the contents into the first bowl. The liquid surrounding the lump is called “buttermilk”. Many people use it for baking.

-Remove the lump of butter and place it in the second bowl. Have kids line up and give each a small sample in a plastic cup to take home.

**Background Information** (Discuss this while the kids are doing the activity)

The people who lived in Eckley in the 1800’s were very self-sufficient. This means that they didn’t need to rely on others to survive. They made many of the products that you and I would buy from the grocery store today, such as bread. One of the products made by hand would be butter. Many villagers owned livestock like cattle, and they would get their milk from these cows. Many times, it was children like you who would be sent by their mother to milk the cow or take care of other animals.

After collecting the milk, they would let it sit out for half a day in shallow earthenware dishes, allowing tiny fat molecules to float to the top and forming a layer of cream that can be skimmed and collected. Sometimes cream was collected from a few days’ worth of milk to have enough to make a decent amount of butter. After enough had been collected, the cream was put it into a wooden instrument called a churn. The churn often was a wooden barrel with a hole in the lid. A wooden pole with a plunger-like attachment was inserted through the hole.

Women would pull the plunger up and down to agitate the cream. This agitation, or stirring, caused fat molecules to get shaken out of position and clump together. Eventually, after enough agitation, the fat molecules clump so much that butter would form. Room temperature cream forms butter more quickly than cold cream because the molecules can move faster. The liquid left over after the butter has formed a lump is called buttermilk.

At this point in the process, the butter is still not quite ready yet. There would still be pockets of buttermilk within the butter that needed to be removed in order to improve the flavor, as well as help keep the butter from spoiling. The butter was often kneaded by hand or with a wooden spoon to remove the excess buttermilk. Then, sometimes salt was added, once again for both flavor and preservation. At this point in time, salting foods was a common method of preservation.

In more prosperous households, the butter might then be pressed into a mold. However, you can see from the state of the miner’s houses that they had very few novelty items. Butter molds would not have been used at Eckley because it would be seen as a frivolous use of what little money they had. Instead, butter would have been scooped into crocks or shaped by hand into basic blocks.

After the butter was made, it was either left out or it would have been moved to the root cellar. The root cellar was a dirt-floor basement built under the house. Because it was underground, it stayed cool all year round. This was not as efficient as our modern-day refrigerating system, but it did help preserve some foods.

Butter was a very essential part of cooking at Eckley. Many of the traditional recipes used large amounts of butter. Staples like pierogis were often slathered in butter. Potato pancakes called for butter, while normal pancakes used the buttermilk. As you can see in the museum, women spent a large portion of their time baking bread. This hand-made bread was an important staple. Often times, toast or buttered bread was a large part of their meal.