



The *Cougar Bob Review*

Volume 16, No. 1, November 2007

Hide Tanning Requires Brains

POST FALLS, ID—Rathdrum Prairie dweller, Christopher Arndt, is a Mountain Man at heart. No surprise, then, that he plans to construct practical leather clothing from deer hides he tans. At the next big Rendezvous for trappers, hunters and black powder muzzleloader shooters, he wants to look the part.

“Cougar Bob tanned hides successfully years ago using borax,” Christopher says of his friend. “Just knowing that we hunter-trappers can do the

tanning ourselves inspired me to go ahead and try it.”

One of his teenaged home-schooled buddies gave him a deer hide to work. “I ruined it,” says Christopher, “but by then I was determined to overcome the problems that stand between me and a useable piece of leather. Luckily, friends trusted me with four more white tail deer hides.”

Personal Hazards Galore—“Sure, you have to soak the hide in water first until the hair starts falling off,” he recalls, “but I wasn’t supposed to soak it in sub-freezing weather. My fingers nearly froze.”

Come spring, however, the contents of Christopher’s hide-working barrel bake for days in the sun outside the dining room window. “Without a doubt,” he says, “the Home Government crackdown because of the stench proved to be the greatest hazard of all.”

Many dressings used to soften hides are safe, such as a combination of soap and certain oils, eggs, milk, sweet corn and other natural plant mixes, some cactus, but others carry their own dangers. Deer brains, for instance, like American Indians used. “Brain tanning is the most labor-intensive method, but it turns out the best buckskin,” he says. “At the same time, it requires precautions because of mad cow disease.”

Even smoking a hide-in-the-white over a punk wood fire in a bucket on a windy day threatens your health. “You’re going to get smoke in the eyes anyway,” the tanner predicts. “But I got a breathing mask to save my lungs!”



Hunter-trapper Christopher styles in the buckskin pants he constructed from hides he tanned.

Dangers to the Hide—Tough as it is, the hide itself is in peril all the while, unless the tanner takes note. For instance, he strongly advises that you avoid catching the hide on fire during the smoking process. Not only that, nicking hide during hair removal, or removing too many top layers of skin and fiber inflict damage to the fiber network. “Also, after you’ve brained the hide and wrung it out,” he cautions, “don’t quit too soon. If you allow it to dry without working every area, it will lock up again and become a stiff mass of rawhide.”

Call in the Experts—Considering the whopping array of threats this tanner must resolve, finishing the rendezvous outfit before he is an old man seems unlikely. That is until, during their Library search, his Dad discovers Matt Richards’ in-depth reference book on brain tanning, *Deerskins into Buckskins*. Christopher absorbs the book and troubleshoots his tanning hazards as they come.

“All of my sources said brains were the best method for softest buckskin, but not for waterproof leather.” He is beginning to sound like the one who knows. “Chemical tanning bonds the fibers of the skin and gives a smooth surface that drips the water away. Brains, on the other hand, lubricate rather than bond the fibers. Your comfortable buckskin, although quieter moving through the woods, is a sponge in wet brush. It stretches, too, so it may not make the best bag handle!”

So Christopher purchases his own blender, creams deer brains into a paste, whips water into the slime, and soaks his deer hide in it for a day or so. Then he



Christopher Arndt softens a brain tanned deer hide stretched on a frame.

wrings it out, and repeatedly soaks it and wrings it again to remove water and mucus.

“Generally, you need one brain per hide,” he reveals. “Brains can be used again and again, you know, until they reek.”

Now, he softens hides when it’s between 70 and 80 degrees. Then he expects them to dry in a brief three hours.

“Keep those fibers moving, or the glue between the fibers will set up,” he advises. “I stretch my hide in a frame of Indian design like this,” referring to a web-encircled setup that, at first glance, looks like a trampoline up on end. “Then I systematically lean into the hide with a heavy stick and wipe it down the hide like I’m giving it a big massage.

“If the skin stays where you stretch it, it needs more work. But if it rebounds to its shape, that’s when the skin is done.” He speaks reverently. “I don’t tighten up a baggy skin on a rack when it is rebounding. I wouldn’t be able to feel when it is done and it’s time to move on to the smoking.”

Christopher remembers when two men he knows waded in the creek wearing their buckskins, one skin in-the-white not smoked, the other smoked. “Back in camp later, the white pants stiffened into crisp rawhide as they dried. The man with the smoked buckskins just shook his out, and they were soft again.”

Tanned-smoked hides hold up well in a machine wash with soap, but Christopher probably would treat them with a little less vigor, and add oils with the soap. “Besides,” he says, “in the machine, the fringe on my pants would get tied in knots.”

With a bit of help from his Mom, the pants pattern takes shape, and he doesn’t mangle any major pieces during cutting.

“Should I use a flat seam? Or a hidden seam?” He ponders, then tackles the hidden seam, sewing the hide pieces edge to edge, then turning the pants inside out. Next time, he wants a flat seam. “I’ll stitch overlapping pieces of buckskin. That’s more streamlined and durable. And not so bulky from stretching leather.”

The Wearing—He gives his finished brain-tanned buckskin britches a hitch. The fringe ripples. “These pants breathe...cut wind...feel like chamois,” declares the Mountain Man. “They are the most comfortable pants I ever wore.”

First, he’ll show Cougar Bob. Then bring on the Rendezvous!

Price of Ammo Shoots Up

Cougar Bob craves the sound of a rifle shot, but ammunition is in short supply here. One symptom of shortage is the 250% increase from 2006 in the cost of ammo for his daily shoots at the Rifle Range. A box of 20 cartridges of his favorite caliber that was \$12.95 is now \$31.95, depending on store, and at times, requires a wait.

Troy at the Black Sheep Sporting Goods sheds light on the situation. “Cost of base metals, like copper and lead, has increased, as it has for gun powder, and gas for transport,” he explains. “Demand by military and others also reduces availability. Law enforcement, sportsmen and military all feel the result.”

Cougar plans never to bite the bullet. “I’ve trained Babe to buy or order quickly--‘Hornady 30.06, 180 grain, and .270, 130 grain,’ with no notes on her hand.”

“I quit smoking cigarettes in August and am very mellow,” he points out. “But without my target range ammo, I might get cranky.”

“Before it comes to that,” says Babe, “I’ll download a Rifle Shot ring tone on my phone to tide him over.”

Fancy Wiring Keeps them Guessing

The Campbell’s had no luck at all for weeks, getting their satellite dish connection to give them any TV stations. Not even for *Gunsmoke*.

“In a desperate attempt to maintain our orderly lifestyle, I had a technician walk me through the repair on the phone,” says Babe. “I followed his instructions exactly—the switcheroo of transmitter and receiver, the securing of the phone lines in the dumaflop, the sequencing of commands on the remote thingy to summon the signal.”

“Yes, now we’re all set,” the Chief says, obviously pleased. “When the phone rings, or when the satellite updates programming in the middle of the night, the floor lamp beside the my easy chair comes on. It only takes another phone call to shut off the light.”

But best of all, under the new improved system, *Gunsmoke* is available again.



Bet and Bob Campbell greet you from their Post Falls, Idaho, garden of forgiving plants that thrive on neglect.

Hands Off Gardening Suits Campbell’s

Bob looks out the east window towards the row of lilac bushes that his wife never trims.

“Babe, did you plant tulips? I see some purple blobs out there.” He points. “There, about 50 feet over toward the edge of the lot.”

“No,” she admits. “Probably volunteer, from previous owners 50 years ago. How many do you see?”

“...four...six...yes, I see stems, too,” he reports.

“Give me those binoculars, Chief. It’s my turn.”

May you grow and prosper all year long!

Jesus replied, “If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.” John 4:10 (NLT)