

Breaking a hide

Local experts share the knowledge of their mothers and ancestors before them

In a time when waste was infrequent, Rose Mitchell's mother found a glove on the railroad tracks. The glove, taken apart at the seams, served as a pattern for her mother's hide tanning business for many years.

Back in the old days, Mitchell's mother and father traveled to Sisters where hunters would sell them hides. There, from the back of their truck, they would scrap and wash the hides, while taking glove orders from local residents.

"They would get around 100 hides," says Rose Mitchell.

In her youth Mitchell mostly did the scrapping and washing of the fur.

But around 1976, she taught herself the whole process. Her children learned the trait too.

Today Mitchell and her adult children are among the few who still retain the knowledge of how to tan hide, an inherent part of the hunting tradition.

Moccasins, burial dresses, wedding dresses and rawhide-sewn drums are common traditional uses of the hide. Modern day items, such as wallets and watchbands, are also made with animal skin.

Behind Mitchell's house on Upper Dry Creek Road, her late husband built a simple wood shed.

The dirt floor shed is divided into two, one part for tanning hide and the other for drying venison.

In the tanning part is a wood stove, large tin buckets for soaking the hides, and several tools reminiscent of the past. In a corner is a pile of dried willow used for smoking buckskin. She uses a lava rock to scrap away the thin epidermal layer of tissue on the inside of the hide.

On the table lies a pile of deer hooves. The deer hooves can be used as bells in powwows, she said.

Inside her house, in the freezer, frozen in old socks, are deer brains, an essential ingredient for tanning hide. Mitchell tans hide in a traditional way called brain tanning, a method used by the Indians of the Columbia River plateau.

"My mother said, 'Don't let anything go to waste,'" explains Mitchell.

Not just any stone

The tanning process is time consuming and difficult, but rewarding.

"It takes a lot of muscle and patience. But it's really amazing to see the transformation. An ugly, stinky hide turns into a beautiful, soft piece of buckskin," says Lucinda Greene, another local tanner.

Like Mitchell, Greene learned the trade from her mother. Instead of a tin bucket, Greene ties her hides to the shore of the Deschutes River near her home. She weighs the hides down with rocks.

Tanning refers to the practice of infusing the animal hide with the preservative tannic acid, which prevents the skin from rotting.

In brains there is tannic acid as well as other conditioners and oils. The milky brains solution mixed into the soaking water of a hide softens the fabric. Enzymes in the brains are said to break down the hide-glues, a thin gummy layer on the skin.

"After working with brains, my hands feel like silk," says Greene.

Greene and Mitchell each possess a family heirloom tool.

The tool is a stick with a large stone tied to the end with a rounded edge. The tool is known as the poking stick. Mitchell's mother traded for the stone with an old woman near the Columbia River. Greene's mother received her stone from Chief Thomas Thompson

Story
and
photos
by
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In the photos below, **TOP LEFT:** Rose Mitchell uses an old time tool for scrapping flesh and fur off of the animal hide. **TOP RIGHT:** An ancient tool used for softening the hide. A taut hide, strung up, is poked with this tool on both sides near a warm fire. This tool was passed on to Mitchell by her mother, who traded for it at the Columbia River. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** This beautiful beaded vest is one of many traditional items that can be made with a tanned hide. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Mitchell holds up one of her finished deer hides.



Rose Mitchell in her tanning shed on the Warm Springs Reservation. The string in the photo is one of many used for stretching hides.



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Lucinda Greene, Warm Springs hide tanner

of Celilo Village.

"Rocks were made by spiritual men on the river. They found a certain rock and threw it to the ground a certain amount of times until it was chipped just right," said Greene.

Chief Thompson gave three rocks to her mother. Spiritual leader Isaac McKinley gave her mother another stone.

A poking stick is used to stretch and

soften a skin that is tied taut about four feet from a fire.

Greene and Mitchell tan their hides in similar ways but with subtle differences. First the hides are washed. Greene then hangs the washed hide in a tree to dry.

"The older the hide is, the better. In old hides the tanning solution absorbs better. The newer ones are stronger and need more time for the solution to

absorb," says Greene.

When ready to use, the hide is soaked in cold water for three to eight days. The soaked hide is ready when the hair pulls out easily.

After a soak, the hide's fur and inner flesh are scrapped with a sharp tool on a smooth scrapping pole. The smoothing pole is used to prevent puncturing holes while scrapping.

A well-squeezed hide is then sub-

merged in lukewarm brain water. For three hides, Mitchell uses about 1.5 gallons of water. Greene puts her brains in the blender before adding them to the water. About a pound of brains will do.

In the time before freezers, the brains were dried. Greene's mother cooked the brains at a simmer. Then she spread the cooked brains between two pieces of cheesecloth. Sticks would be inserted on the outside, forming little squares which were then hung up to dry.

The hide is left in the brain water for two to three days. It is then removed from water, wrung out and stretched tightly between the stretching frame.

"Stretch it until it turns white," says Mitchell.

Then the hide is returned to the brain water for a second soak. Mitchell doesn't use the same brain water for this soak. Greene, on the other hand, thinks the stinkier the water the better.

A tanner knows the enzymic brain water has permeated the skin by squeezing the skin.

"If it bubbles, then it's ready," says Mitchell.

Wrung out again, the hide is stretched on the frame near a warm fire. There it is prodded with the poking stick, breaking the thin epidermis.

High heat will stiffen the hide.

"The hips and neck are the hardest to soften," says Greene.

After many hours the "flesh turns like baby powder," she says.

Brush it off and the tanner has a white buckskin.

Greene and Mitchell smoke their hides in the same way, but they use a different wood. Greene uses rotten cedar wood and Mitchell uses crushed willow.

Coals from the hot stove are put in a metal bucket. The wood is placed on top. Thick smoke billows out.

Two to three hides are sewn together like a teepee. A denim skirt is sewn to the bottom and wrapped tightly around the lip of the bucket.

The hide is watched carefully until it turns a rich leathery brown.

The going rate for a well-tanned buckskin is about \$100.

Both women agree that a factory-made hide is no comparison to one made with traditional brain tanning.

A properly tanned hide will keep you cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Water will roll off a smoked hide.

"Tanning hides is a form of therapy," says Greene. A beaten hide, transformed into a beautiful buckskin, serves as a metaphor for life, she says.

"It's kind of like a lost art. Not too many do it anymore. When someone wants to learn, I just tell them to bring their hide down to my house and I will teach them," says Greene.