Traditional Buckskin

During November, deer hunters across Oklahoma are out in the woods morning and evening, hoping to take a nice animal. After a successful deer hunt, the meat is usually preserved for eating, but many hunters are left wondering what to do with the hide. Some sense an inherent beauty in the hide and find ways to use it. Nevertheless, every year thousands of deer hides go to waste. To our Choctaw ancestors, the hide was a wonderful material, almost as good as the deer meat itself. Deer hides were used for many things, but one of the most important was as the raw material in making buckskin.

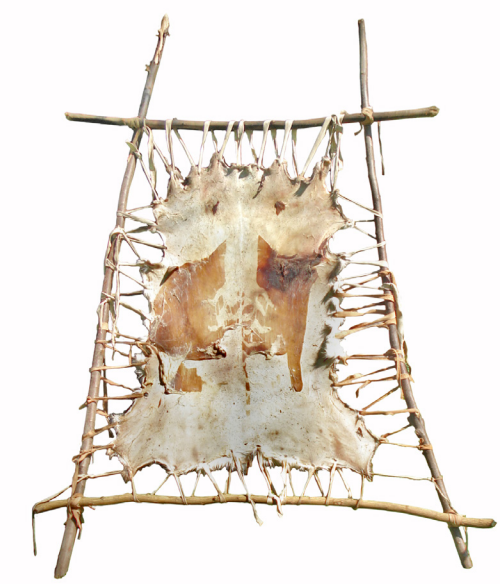

Fig. 1

For readers who have never handled traditional buckskin, or "tvlhko" in the Choctaw language, it is an amazing product; as soft as fleece, but stronger than any commercial leather. It is one of the warmest clothing materials available, but it still allows the skin to breath. Freshly smoked traditional buckskin smells like smoked sausage, and unlike today's commercial buckskin, it can even be eaten for food value in an emergency situation.

When looking at a cold, slimy, and perhaps bloody deer hide, it seems almost impossible that it could ever be metamorphosed into a product as wonderful as traditional buckskin. The process for creating buckskin is a complex art form that has been perfected by Native Americans for well over 10,000 years.

For at least the last 100 years, men have been the main hide-workers in Choctaw society, however women probably did more of it in the past. Producing buckskin began with skinning the animal, a process known as "lhuffi" in the Choctaw language (Byington 1915:253-254). After the initial skinning incisions were made along the belly and legs, the hide or "hakshup" (133) had to be pulled off of the animal by hand. Many hunters today remove the hide by using a knife to slice it free from the underlying meat. This unavoidably puts scores in the hide, which later in the tanning process, will rip out and leave big holes.

Choctaws traditionally used two different methods for removing the hair from a deer hide, a process known generally as "boyaffi" (96). One of these methods involved stretching the hide on a wooden hide frame, called "isht tikili" (207) (see Fig. 1). Holes were cut into the edge of the hide, a process called "hakshup a lukaffi" (255). Leather laces "lhibata" (251) were slid through the holes, wrapped around the frame, pulled tightly until the hide was taunt, and then tied to the frame. The hide was left until it dried into stiff rawhide, called "hakshup hishi iksho" (Watkins 1977:33 [1892]). After the hide was dried, a sharp stone-bladed scraper would be used to scrape off the hair, as well as the epidermis and grain layers of the underlying hide (Fig. 2).

While the above method was sometimes used, Choctaw hide-workers more often accomplished the same task using a tanning beam, or "ashaffi iti chito" (Fig. 3). The moist hide was laid flesh-side down on top of this beam, with the worker pinching the edge of the hide between his waist and the end of the beam. A two-handled, flat-bladed scraper called "isht shaffi" (Dana Masters personal communication) was used to scrape off the hair as well as the epidermis and grain layers of the hide (Fig. 4). A deer hide could be scraped on a beam as soon as it was removed from the animal. Alternately, the hide could be soaked in wood ashes and water for a period of several days. This killed any bacteria in the hide, and chemically changed the hide, making it much easier to soften later in the tanning process.

After a hide soaked in wood ashes had been scraped, it had to be weighted down under water in a creek and left for a day to wash out the wood ash and return the hide to a neutral pH.

Fig. 3

Choctaw traditional tanners used a group of chemicals known as emulsified oils to change stiff rawhide into supple leather. These

Fig. 2

Fig. 4

oils came in the form of animal brains, egg yolks, and corn mush. A dry hide could be soaked in water and then rung out until it was just damp. Meanwhile, the brains, egg yolks, or mush were mixed with water, mashed up, and heated to the temperature of hot bath water. The hide would be soaked in this dressing solution for minutes to hours, or even beaten with the dressing solution in a wooden mortar and pestle. Thereafter, the hide would be wrung out. If bubbles didn't emerge through the hide during wringing, it would be soaked in the dressing solution again.

Fig. 5

In the Choctaw language the hide-softening process is known as "hakshup lhopushkichi" (c.f. Byington 1915:254). In order for a hide to dry soft, it had to be constantly stretched back and forth during the drying process. This caused the fibers in the hide to slide back and forth past each other, and helped the emulsified oils prevent natural glue bonds from forming between the fibers, which would make the hide hard and stiff. Contrary to popular belief, deer hides were not chewed to soften them, but Choctaw people did use several other techniques. The simplest was to stretch the hide with the hands and knees, constantly turning it and pulling it. Another technique known as "bilhi" (91), involved lacing the hide back onto the hide frame, and using a pointed, paddle-like implement to forcefully push into the hide, and then downward along its surface, repeatedly covering every square inch (Fig. 5). Another technique, involved firmly planting the softening tool in the ground, and then pulling the loose hide back and forth over the tool's working edge. Whatever technique was used, softening was an extremely strenuous process, and it had to be kept up regularly for hours until the hide dried soft. If any part of the hide dried stiff, in had to be soaked in the emulsified oils and then softened again.

Fig. 6

A newly softened piece of traditional buckskin is white like a sheet of paper. If it gets wet, it will stiffen back into rawhide. Choctaw people prevented this by exposing the buckskin to smoke (Fig. 6). Smoke contains resin and formaldehyde that chemically protect soft buckskin from getting stiff again; they also help protect it from bug damage. Dried corncobs were a favorite hide-smoking material for many Choctaws. Corncob smoke not only protected the hide but also turned it a pretty yellowish color. Other smoking materials could be used to make the hide other colors; oak bark made a dark brown, sweet gum seedpods made a bright yellow; alder bark made a reddish color. Smoked buckskin was sometimes also soaked in dyes made from plant materials like walnut hulls that are high in tannic acid. This not only gave the buckskin a dark color, but also made it less stretchy, less water absorbent, and completely unappetizing to bugs (Fig. 7). A finished buckskin could be made into a robe, moccasins, a breech cloth, a skirt for women, bedding, or any variety of bags and containers.

Today, a few Choctaw people process hides in this ancient way, and many people from other tribes process hides using basically similar techniques. The Ponca Tribe in Nebraska has gone as far as establishing a tribal business that sells hides tanned traditionally by tribal members. The amount of work involved in doing traditional hide work is tremendous. However, with all of the deer hides that get thrown away every year, with many people wanting to return to more natural processes and materials, and with traditionally tanned deer hides often selling for $150 and up, more people are becoming interested in this ancient art.

Fig. 7