

MAKING MOCCASINS

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

Tell me about making moccasins.¹

I have several patterns. There's one type of moccasin that was made in the southeastern states that has a lot of pleats in the toe of it, in the top. I don't think there's any way to describe that without an illustration

In the northwest there is a side-seam moccasin.



Sample pattern for a side-seam moccasin. Image source:
<http://holypriesthood.blogspot.com/2009/11/soft-sole-moccasins.html>

You lay your foot on top of a piece of paper or leather and you have your pattern folded, or use just a half of it for your pattern. Mark out around your toe so that there's room to put two fingers crossways ahead of it, and one finger or maybe a little more behind your heel.

Then you wrap a measure or string or something about the biggest part of your instep, slightly back of the ball of your foot. It will be roughly the same size as if you had wrapped it around the ball of your foot.²

You have a fold in your paper. You put your foot on it within the finger marks you made, and with the fold under the middle of your foot. Then you remove your foot, fold your string, and measure half of it across the instep, plus maybe 1/4" extra.

Now you have a few guide marks there. The marks on each side of your instep, you can draw a line straight back to your heel. Then draw a line forward, staying away from your foot by half the thickness of your foot. Bring it around your toe on that mark that's two fingers ahead, and then all around. It'll gradually get a little wider to the mark on the other side of your foot, and from there you can go straight back.

You lay that on a folded piece of leather so that it makes an outline for half of the moccasin. You put the instep edge of your pattern against the fold in your leather. Mark around that pattern and cut it out.

So you have most of one side fastened together. There will be a "V" shape right at the toe. If you take that piece of leather and open it out so you've got two halves side by side with a V cut out alongside your big toe, and if your toes are long and your big toe...you can cut your pattern so that it's more or less makes...it doesn't have to go out all the way around that big toe, because leather gives some, and your foot is quite tapered.

Anyway, then you just fold it back over and starting at the front, sew the two sides together with a piece of leather thong. Thread frays and wears out quicker.

Before I begin sewing, I pre-punch holes in the leather, using a block of wood with the end grain sticking up. First I make some guide marks on the wood to help me position the skin for punching each hole.



This is a replica of the Oliver's system for pre-punching holes in leather, which is represented by paper. The dimensions are not to scale.

Replica and photos by Ole Wik.

- First I punch a hole into the wood with the awl, or often with a nail set³ that I've sharpened. (Dark spot on the lower line in the photo above.) I wiggle the tool around, and take it out.

- I make a mark alongside it (vertical line M1), the distance (D1) that I want to put the hole in from the edge of the leather.
- Then I make another mark across that right where the hole is, since the leather will be covering the hole (M2).
- Next to that I have another mark that is the distance apart that I want to make my stitches. (Line M3. It is separated from line M2 by the distance from one hole to the next, represented here by D2.)
- I make my first hole in the leather with my awl (dark spot on the paper in the second photo). Then I position the leather so that the edge is along the first line (M1) and this first hole is on the third line (M3, with the dark spot over the point marked X).
- The hole in the block of wood will be covered up, but with the existing hole in the leather (at X) and the edge of the leather along the second line (M2), I'll know where to position the awl so that it will be above the hole in the wooden block. I push the tip of the awl down into that hole, and continue in the same way until I've pre-punched all the holes.

From there you just run my babiche⁴ in and out, in and out. Where the leather goes around your toes, you draw it up so that it is somewhat gathered, to make room for your toes. Then going back along the outside of your foot, just before you get clear to the back, maybe a couple of inches, you tie it off temporarily.

What you have now is just a big pocket. There's no place to put your foot in. You make a cut from the back forward to the instep, just far enough that you can get it on over your foot.



One type of side-seam moccasin.

Note line where top will be cut for foot opening.

Image source: <http://1onewolf.com/lakota/society23.htm>

Make a cut in the top layer. That can be tricky, because you've got two moccasins there. If you cut the same side on each one, you won't have a right and a left hand moccasin—you'll have two of the same side. You make that cut so that it's not exactly true with the

moccasin. It's cut so that it opens up about 1/4" or so closer to the instep, because the leather will pull up into your instep and move around over a little bit.

That cut goes from the back forward to intersect a cross cut, just a little one. Where it intersects that cross cut, there's more slack. It's kind of a hollow in the instep of your foot on the inside, so you move the end of that line over toward your instep, and then it'll end up pretty much straight when it's all in use.

Now you can open that up, slide your foot into it, and pull the sides of the leather on each side at the back around, to see if they're going to fit. I usually leave the moccasin a little bit long just to make sure that they can fit.

Then there's a number of ways you can do it, but you can just sew that heel up. There'll be a little wedge-shaped tab at the bottom. You can wear it awhile and tuck it up and tack it, or you can sew it over the seam that goes up and down the back.

I got ahead of myself there. When you're getting ready to sew up the back of the heel of the moccasin, you left off the side seam a couple of inches. Since you've got them lapped together there, it makes a rather bulky seam. There I cut a little off of each side, and punch my hole a little closer to the edge, and instead of going in and out, I go in and around to make a whip stitch.

If you do that right, then you don't have much of a seam there. When you pull it out and work it a little bit, both ends of the leather are butted together inside of the seam. That makes it easier to set the two sides together up and down the back.

Then you can put a tongue in if you want to. I usually do. Punch a couple of holes along each side of where the tongue is, put a string through and tie it together, so that it will lace kind of like a regular shoe.

Was there a top piece?

No. If you want to make a high moccasin out of it, you just sew another piece of leather to the top that goes clear around your ankle. The nice thing about that is that you don't have to worry about how much to pucker the bottom to fit the top. You just sew it together. When you get a little bit sewn around the toes, you just stick your foot in there and pull the babiche up enough to make it fit, so that both the top and bottom have the same amount of gathering in them.

That's the simplest way that I know of to make a moccasin.

Did you learn that from a book?

Yeah. It does give some moccasin patterns. Elmer Kreps does too, I think, but not this one.

Where did this one come from?

You beat me there. It came from the Indians on the northwest coast originally, but where I first saw it, I don't know. Maybe in the magazine *Primitive Technology*⁵.

Anything else to add?

The same thing I've added. There's no hard and fast news. Just make it work out the way you want it to. Don't be afraid to experiment.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) I have transcribed Oliver's instructions as faithfully as I could, but am having some trouble visualizing what he is describing from this point on.

3) A nail set is a tool used to drive nails without leaving an impression of the hammer in the work.

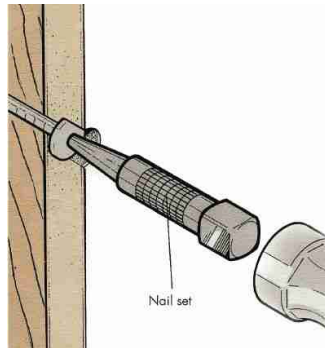
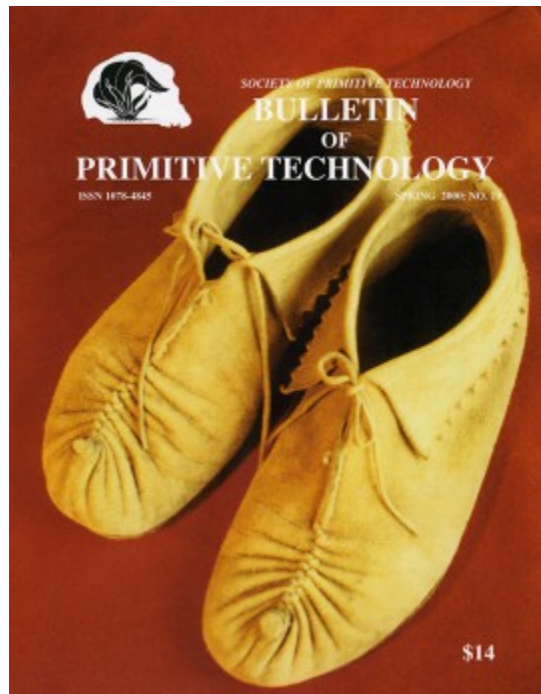


Image: <http://home.howstuffworks.com/how-to-fix-popped-nails.htm>

4) Babiche: "Thong(s) of rawhide or sinew used as cord, lacing, or webbing, in the manufacture of snowshoes, braided straps and tumplines, fishing and harpoon lines, knit bags, etc." (<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/babiche>)

5) Society of Primitive Technology Bulletin 19 (Spring 2000) has a section on footwear.



<http://www.primitive.org/products/bulletin-19-spring-2000-clothing/>

