

MAKING BABICHE¹

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

In the summertime or especially in the springtime, there would be puddles around where the snow was melting. If I had some extra caribou skins that I wanted to make into string, I would soak them in the water when the sun was shining on it to warm it. After a couple of days the hair would begin to slip. I'd put the skin over a beam and scrape it off with a piece of sled runner steel, the back of a butcher knife, or whatever was handy. By that time the hair was loose, and most of it came right off easy.

Then I'd stretch the skin out. At various times I've had different structures for that. Usually there's a fairly heavy crosspiece that the skin is folded over. Both sides of the skin have holes placed about a couple of inches apart around the edges, which I laced back individually to the framework.

One way I've done that is to make small hooks out of fairly heavy wire. It takes a lot of them, but it's a whole lot easier just to hook your lashing line over a series of S hooks than it is to thread it through that series of holes, and then have to unravel the whole thing by drawing it back through each one.



Example of stretching a hide using hooks.

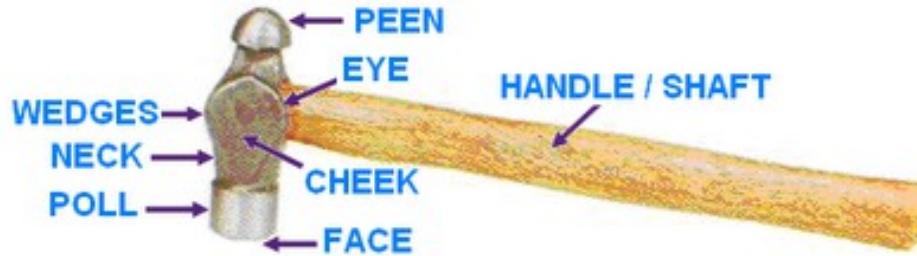
Image: <http://www.wildlifesculptures.co.nz/studio/tanskin.html>

I don't remember ever making a pair of snowshoes when I was at Kotzebue. But when I was up at Ambler, I'd buy an ugruk² skin. They were usually de-haired when I bought them.

As far as the moosehide goes, I would cut a piece of moose hide big enough to where I figured I could get what lacing I needed.

First I would take a sharp knife and cut the hair off of a "flint hide", one that was dried up hard. It wouldn't be necessary to cut it right down close, like shaving, but fairly close so that I could get a feel. I didn't want to cut into the skin.

Then I would make a 2" auger hole in the end of a good sized block of birch wood. By moving the hide around over that hole and beating with a ball peen hammer, I would soften it a little bit. That would also break the fascia tissue loose where the hair is, and then it was relatively easy to scrape it off with an ichuun.



Oliver would have been striking the hide with the peen.

Image: <http://edu-support.blogspot.com/2012/07/general-purpose-tools-required-in-basic.html>



An ichuun consists of a piece of pipe on a specially-shaped handle.

Oliver Cameron made this one.

Image: Cold Climate Housing Research Center, Fairbanks, AK

Then I'd cut a hole in the middle of the hide with a good sharp knife. I'd just start going round and round inside the hole, cutting a strip maybe 5/32" or 3/16" wide. Those hides invariably have a little grit in them, at the base of the hair. It's hard to get it all off, so I'd have to sharpen my knife every once in a while.

There's a way to make a gig or gauge so that you start your string and it stays uniform in width all the way along. You cut a slot in the end of a stick and hold your knife over the slot. I've done that, but very rarely. It's usually a nuisance, because I have to involve somebody else in it.³

The hide is dampened enough so it is a little bit flexible. If the skin is damp, the string is quite a bit smaller, and then it is pulled during drying, so it's not as hard to cut as if it was bone dry.

That applies to caribou hides too. I believe I mentioned that quite often I'll open a carcass more down the sides than right up the middle, so that I can take off the belly skin in one piece. That gives me a piece of skin that's quite a bit larger and thinner and is more or less uniform in thickness. It's real handy to have a thin piece of skin sometimes. I make mitten liners or something like that out of it.

I'd always imagined that you'd cut around and around from outside, toward the middle. Is it easier to handle when you start in the middle and work toward the outside?⁴

Yeah, it does seem easier to handle. I don't know why I started doing it that way. I do the same thing when I'm cutting up a whole skin. I'll cut it along the back a little ways, and some distance

from the end of the skin up to the cut is about the same distance from the cut over to the edge of the width of the skin.

However, if I want some exceptionally strong rope, sometimes I'll use a cased hide⁵ rather than a flat hide, and go around and around. Usually I'll cut the neck that way, and sometimes a leg skin too. You're not cutting it on the bias, and it seems to make a rope that's quite a bit stronger that way.

Sometimes I'll cut a whole hide down the middle and just cut strips along one side, but that doesn't give me a long enough piece to do the foot part of a snowshoe. Even when you cut it round and round, you're pulling on one side of the strand more than the other. It seems reasonable that it wouldn't be as strong as if it were cut the full length of the hide, but it's still plenty strong enough.

I once experimented with cutting the hide off the shin of a moose, going round and round. I figured that the hide would be of a good length and would tend to lay out flat.

I've done that, but normally I open the legs and save them for other uses—mukluks and so forth. When you take the leg off of a caribou you cut it off fairly high at a joint. I've never done that with a moose.

I have done that with the neck skin of a caribou. I had peeled it off the carcass in one piece, and slipped the hair. If you have a good feel and lay it on a suitable board, you can just cut the hair right down close. Do keep your knife sharp.

If the hide is green and fresh when you're working on it, or at least not dried, you slip it over the end of a log that is smoothed up for it. You hold one end over the end of the log and just go ahead and start working on it. Otherwise, if you leave the big end open, you can wedge it against a stick and pull the hide out to you, holding it over your index finger and thumb, and shave it off that way.

One of the big problems with doing that is that if you've got any lump of fat or meat on the underside, you're going to cut a hole in your hide. But if you're just stretching it out and then cutting the hair off, you don't have to worry about that.

Next, I cut it round and round for strips. Afterward, since the skins are damp and stretchy, I wrap the cord around and around cache legs or trees to dry, pulling until most of the stretch is out.

Once the babiche is dry, it's semi-flexible. To soften it up so that it's easy to use, you can stick your axe in a block of wood and seesaw sections of that babiche back and forth over it to break up the fascia on the inside. Lots of times it will peel off.

You can use any sharp metal surface for that. I used to have part of the metal upright stand of my treadle sewing machine. If you're using an axe head, you use the corner between the eye and the cutting edge. You work a two or two-and-a-half feet of babiche at a time, and then move it along and do another section. Then it's ready to use.

1) 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." Source: <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/babiche>

2) Bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*)

3) The tool Oliver is describing is known as a “draw gauge”. The antique model below was made by C.D. Osborne & Co. in Newark, NJ for cutting straps of leather. Modern versions are available on line (for example, at http://www.sbearstradingpost.com/leather_tools.html).



Image: <http://lumberjocks.com/Blake/blog/10411>

4) 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.

5) A cased hide is one that has been removed in one piece from an animal, then placed snugly on a specially-shaped board or wire frame for drying, fur side in.



Image: http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/TEM_Chapt_17_206599_7.pdf