

from the book Buckskin: The Ancient Art of Braintanning
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BRIEF OVERVIEW
OF THE
WET-SCRAPE BRAINTANNING PROCESS

This overview is intended to give you a perspective on the wet-scrape braintanning process as a whole. There are many different methods and variations that can be applied in braintanning. Our own process varies quite a bit in order to adapt to new environments and situations.

The following are, in order of execution, the major steps of wet-scraping which will be outlined in this book:

- FLESHING
- SOAKING
- GRAINING
- MEMBRANING
- BRAINING
- SOFTENING
- SMOKING

FLESHING: Fleshing is the removal of any meat and/or fat left on the hide after skinning. It is carried out on a smooth beam, using a dull scraping tool. The skin is draped over the beam, and the excess tissue is scraped off with a pushing or pulling motion, depending upon which type of beam is used.

The two basic types of beams are the waist and upright. The same beam, tool, and motion are also used in the graining and membranizing steps. Beams and tools are further discussed in Chapter 7, Tools and Sharpening.

SOAKING: Soaking the hide in water contributes to the breakdown of the grain so that it can be removed.

GRAINING This is the removal of the grain, epidermis, and hair. As its name would indicate, the primary objective of graining is the removal of the grain. The hair and epidermis are also removed, as a matter of course, since they are attached to the grain.

MEMBRANING Membraning is the removal of the membrane (hypodermis) from the flesh side of the skin. This undesirable tissue is not completely removed during the fleshing step.

BRAINING: The skin is, as thoroughly as possible, saturated with the brains of some animal. The brains are soaked, rubbed, and/or dried in. Saturation of the skin with brains lubricates the internal fiber structure and allows it to be softened in the next step.

SOFTENING: The skin is wrung out to remove excessive moisture and then manipulated, pulled, and stretched until it is dry and soft throughout. This is accomplished by hand, as well as by pulling the skin over a vertically oriented steel cable. During this step, the hide is also “sanded” with pumice on the hair side to remove any remaining grain and break up a crust which tends to form there.

SMOKING: When the buckskin is dry and soft, it is saturated with smoke from smouldering plant materials. Smoking preserves the softness of the skin: allowing it to be washed and still dry soft without having to repeat the softening process. Smoking is accomplished by sewing the edges of one or two skins together to form a bag. A cloth skirt sewn to the hide bag acts as a tube to conduct the smoke into it and keep the skins a safe distance from the heat. The hide bag, with skirt, is then suspended over a pit containing a smouldering fire.

TIME FRAME OF THE TANNING PROCESS

We are very often asked how long it takes to tan a hide. Although this question is difficult to answer, we'll endeavor here

to explore some of the many variables involved in trying to estimate the time involved in tanning a deer skin.

Is the tanner experienced?

Is the tanner aggressive about the work?

Is the skin an easy skin to tan? Does it scrape easily, take brains well?

Is the skin thick or thin? Thick skins take longer to dry during the softening step.

Does the skin have much surface area?

Is the tanning approached in batches of hides or one skin at a time?

Is the question “how long until it’s done?” or “how many work hours are involved?”

There are so many variables, that we can’t answer this question accurately when people ask it. So, we just say five to twelve hours per skin, that’s deer skins and just work hours. Actually, this estimate is probably a fair one of what it takes us to finish skins, but we don’t keep track and don’t think that you should either. You’ll be happier and do a better job if you just go with the grain and do what needs doing. Immerse yourself in the process, and don’t get stuck on getting done quickly or how long it’s taking. Don’t fight the hide, or it might just kick your ass.

We almost never approach tanning with a “one skin at a time do it all the way through” attitude, which makes it even more difficult to make a time estimate. Some of you will be approaching tanning this way and that is certainly fine. Just don’t feel that you have to; there are many points in the process at which you can stop and either dry the skin out or freeze it.