

Getting Grease off of Hides

by Tom Brown Jr.

I have received many letters from students stating that one of the most difficult processes of tanning a hide is getting the grease burns out of the hide. Grease burns usually occur because the hide was poorly skinned and improperly prepared before the tanning process. Once you buy a hide you are subject to the abuse of those people that have skinned the animal and have taken care of it before you received it.

An animal hide that has a lot of fat left on it or has been salted with fat left on it and left to dry is usually badly grease burned. When you soak it and remove the hair, flesh and fat, and before you begin to dry scrape it, you may find areas of the hide that are completely transparent -- areas where you cannot get the grease out. There is a simple solution to this problem, though it is not very Native American or neanderthal because we use some store-bought products. The simplest and most effective way of removing the grease from the hide is to simply wash it. Take the scraped hide and soak and manipulate it in a bucket of warm, soapy water and allow it to sit for an hour. Take it out, rinse it well, re-rack it and continue the tanning process. I caution you, though, not to leave the hide in the soap solution for more than an hour. Otherwise some damage will occur. If you would like to use a more natural soap base, simply use yucca root that has been pounded, bouncing bette flowers, or even meadow sweet flowers will make mild detergents.



Another question that is usually asked is how to get the hair off of exceedingly stubborn hides. That is easily solved by soaking the hide for more than 24 hours. In fact, sometimes before a class I will soak a hide up to four days to make the hair easy to remove. Remember, all hides have different personalities. Some are easily scraped while others you feel you have to sandblast the hair off. If you find you have one of these tenacious hides, simply soak the hide in a mixture of water and wood ash for the last five hours of the soaking. Wood ash should sufficiently loosen the hair.

Another problem students seem to have during the soaking of the hide is that they tend to get a very smelly type of water solution in their bucket, not noticeable especially if soaking in a running stream. This can be remedied and many of the little parasites cut down by taking some boiled acorns or boiled cedar bark and adding a cup of the tannic acid to the beginning soak.