

[On Dressing Hides]

From *Vanishing Spaces - Memoirs of Louis Goulet* [1859-1936]

By Guillaume Charette, printed with permission of translator Ray Ellenwood

It was very important to dress the hides with the hair still on as soon as they had dried, if you wanted to make robes, coats, hats, caps, saddles or saddle blankets, and so on. For those things we chose the skins of five-year-old bulls, the age when the buffalo was at his best in every way.

That kind of leather was called *cuir de maison* because it was done in the winter when the women had more free time. In the summer they had all the work they could handle, making pemmican. Besides, winter was the season of long, dark evenings spent together in groups. Working bees were easy to organize then, so the women took advantage of the opportunity to make all the leather and clothes the family needed.

Actually, this home-made leather was quite easily done. Spread tightly on a stretcher until it was good and dry, the hide was scraped of all impurities, then softened by vigorous rubbing on the skin side until it was soft as cloth. After that, the women would just have to add a few designs in dye or vermillion, a little something to pass the time of an evening.

Once they were finished, because of all the work that had gone into them, winter hides were considered top quality and fetched the best prices, especially in the United States. Some people even bought choice hides and paid old women to work them. My father did business like that, hiring people on quite a large scale, which just goes to show you that other people's labour pays best. I suppose if he'd lived in our times he couldn't have been called a businessman, more likely a vile capitalist drinking other people's sweat.