

from the book *Buckskin: The Ancient Art of Braintanning*
by Steven Edholm and Tamara Wilder
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WHY WET-SCRAPE AND WHAT IS DRY-SCRAPE?

One of the most important steps in the making of buckskin is the removal of the grain. There are two ways to remove grain: by wet-scraping or by dry-scraping. In wet-scraping, the wet skin is laid over a smooth log and the grain is pushed off using a double handled tool with a long, fairly dull edge. In dry-scraping, the skin is stretched out tightly, dried completely, and the grain is shaved off with a very sharp tool. These are the basic methodological differences between wet and dry-scraping. While the rest of the crucial steps in making buckskin are more or less the same whether the skin was wet or dry-scraped, the two approaches do diversely effect both the nature of the finished product and how the hide is treated through the rest of the tanning process.

It can safely be said that the vast majority of Native American groups wet-scraped deer skins. Plains tribes seem to have been the most adamant dry-scrapers; yet, while buffalo skins seem to have been invariably dry-scraped on the Plains, deer, elk, and moose skins were sometimes wet-scraped. In many areas of the country, dry-scraping seems to have been unknown or, at least, never practiced.

We started making buckskin by the dry-scrape process but chose to switch to wet-scraping. Our main reasons for changing over were that we like both the wet-scrape product and the work of wet-scraping itself better than that of dry-scraping. Having chosen wet-scraping, though, we soon found out that all was not buckskin and roses. Each method has its own benefits and pitfalls.



In wet-scraping, the wet skin is laid over a smooth beam of wood, and the grain is “bulldozed” off with a dull tool.



In dry-scraping, the skin is stretched tightly in a frame and dried. The grain and hair are then shaved off with a sharp blade.



Close-up of wet-scraping: note the patch of grain, with hair still attached, being poked off in front of the blade

In *wet-scraping*, a relatively dull tool is used to “bulldoze” the grain off. This process is basically self-regulating; the scraping edge cuts down to a certain level of the skin, slides over the top of it, and pushes away everything at and above that layer (the grain, epidermis, and hair). Therefore, if the skin is scraped thoroughly, the grain is removed to a fairly consistent and tough layer of the skin.

Photo by Margaret Mathewson



Close-up of dry-scraping.

In *dry-scraping*, a very sharp tool is used to remove layers of skin and, unlike wet-scraping, it is not self-regulating; you can, in fact, scrape all the way through the skin. In general, dry-scrapes are scraped deeper than wet-scrapes. One could theoretic-

cally dry-scrape a skin more or less to the same layer that a wet-scraped hide automatically ends up at, but it is more difficult to tell where you're at in relation to the layers of skin. (Some dry-scraping friends of ours are removing a little less from their skins than they used to, and it will be interesting to see how this progresses.) We can usually guess whether a finished buckskin has been wet or dry-scraped but have been fooled a couple of times by dry-scrapes that weren't scraped very deeply.

So, a dry-scraped skin is generally scraped deeper than it would have been had it been wet-scraped. The material which is left on a wet-scrape is more or less of the papillary region (discussed in Chapter 2, Skin Structure) ; that is, the area where the dermis and epidermis meet like two egg cartons stacked. This thin remnant of grain which is left on the skin in wet-scraping will be referred to as the *wet-scrape Layer* from here on. The question arises, "How does the wet-scrape layer affect the rest of the process and the finished product?" . . .in many ways.

The wet-scrape layer is much tighter and finer than the underlying *fiber network Layer* and lends more "bounciness" or "life" to the finished product. The fiber network layer is more open and coarse and, therefore, lacks the springiness of the wet-scrape layer. The average dry-scrape seems to consist almost entirely of fiber network layer and, thus, is left less bouncy and more felt-like in character. Dry-scraped skins generally have a more fuzzy surface texture, which some prefer.

The work of wet-scraping is very different from that of dry-scraping. We like wet-scraping because it's quick and mindless. The self-regulating phenomenon mentioned above, in combination with a tool that is properly dulled, allows one to use a fairly aggressive and maniacal scraping style, so that the job is soon over and done with. You still have to pay attention and watch the skin for signs of under-scraping but not so much as in dry-scraping. Dry-scraping requires much more finesse and mental concentration, loss of which can cause one to pop large holes in the dry, brittle skin. It also seems to take longer on the average, though this certainly can balance out later.

Another difference between the two methods, and a strike against wet-scraping, comes during braining of the skins. Wet-scraped skins don't absorb brains as readily as those that are dry-scraped, while dry-scraped skins usually absorb brains

readily and thoroughly. Wet-scraped skins, on the other hand, often have to go through (and we think they should go through) some kind of thorough, time-intensive braining procedure or pre-treatment of the skin to insure brain penetration. This is where some of the time gained in wet-scraping is lost. Wet-scrapes are also more difficult to wring out thoroughly and take longer to dry during the softening process.

We don't know why the wet-scrape layer remains on the skin while the rest of the grain is removed, nor do we know for sure why it causes braining problems during tanning and sponginess in the finished

But we do know the following:

- the majority of the papillary region is removed, but some small amount still remains on the skin.
- Since the papillary region is not completely removed, not all of the epidermal tissues are removed (i.e. hair roots and bits of epidermis). Neither is the grain layer completely removed.
- The fiber structure of the wet-scrape layer is much finer than the fiber network layer below it. This is quite obvious when comparing average wet and dry-scraped skins.

Whatever the reasons, the wet-scrape layer is both a curse and a blessing, and you will both curse it and bless it in the course of your tanning career.