

The History and Practice of Bark Tanning in Newfoundland and Labrador



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Introduction

In June 2017, Bell Island native, craft producer, and maker Clare Fowler appeared on Heritage NL's Living Heritage Podcast to talk about her work, which focuses on the use of seal fur and seal leather. In the course of the conversation, she brought up the topic of seal skin leather boots, and the use of birch bark in tanning the leather. Regarding sealskin boots, she noted:

They have such a historical and cultural significance on the Northern Peninsula. So many people have used them and they were just like a necessity of life. They're absolutely beautiful and stunning but not too many people are making them anymore and not too many people are doing the birch bark processing. I know a number of people who are experimenting with it but we were only able to track down one gentleman who was actually still doing it on somewhat of a small scale because the demand for it was lessening over time.

The tradition of bark tanning and the use of bark mixtures for the preservation of textiles has a long history in Newfoundland and Labrador. This article traces the linguistic history of the verb form of the word *bark*, the use of bark as a preservative and colourant, describes the process involved in the creation of tanned materials in

both an Indigenous and settler context, and explores how the old tradition of bark tanning or barking is finding new life in the province.

Etymology and Word Use

The word *bark* to refer to the harder outer covering of trees dates back to the 1300s and likely comes from the Old Norse *börkr*, and the Proto-Germanic **barkuz* which is most likely related to birch trees. *Rind* is synonymous with bark, and this word has been retained in some areas of the province. The use of bark as a verb meaning ‘to strip off the bark (of a tree)’ sees its first recorded use in 1540 (“Bark” 2017). *Tan* comes from the late Old English *tannian* and refers to the method of turning animal hides into leather. It comes to us by way of the medieval Latin *tannare* meaning ‘to dye a tawny colour.’ Both uses involve references to *tannum* or ‘crushed oak bark’ which was used in the tanning of leather (“Tan”). The word *tannin* is commonly used today to describe the astringent substance present in some plant materials.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, a large number of British migrant fishermen began settling in Newfoundland and Labrador, bringing with them lexical items which took root in the local vocabulary. We begin to see use of the word *barking* to refer to steeping fabric or hide in an infusion of bark, or to immerse a fishing net in the liquid formed by boiling the bark and buds of trees as preservatives, in recorded use in Newfoundland and Labrador throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. George Patterson reports in an 1895 article on Newfoundland and Labrador English in the *Journal of American Folklore*:

Rind, as a noun, is invariably used to denote the bark of a tree, and, as a verb, to strip it off. The word bark, on the other hand, is only used as a noun to denote the tan which the fisherman applies to his net and sails, and as a verb to denote such an application of it. Thus he will say, “I have been getting some juniper or black spruce rind to make tan bark,” or “I have been barking my net or sails,” meaning that he has been applying the tannin extract to them (Patterson 36).

P. K. Devine, collector of Newfoundland and Labrador folklore, includes *bark* in his 1937 booklet on Newfoundland folk and word lore, defining it as “to soak nets and seines or sails in tan made from rinds of trees” (Devine 7).

The communal vessel in which nets or sails were submerged in a bark infusion to protect against rot was known variously as a *barking kettle*, *barking pot* or *bark pot*. Aaron Thomas included a description of such a utensil in his 1794-1795 journal of a voyage from England to Newfoundland and back to England:

In every Harbour, Creek and Cove there is what may be called a Parish Pott, this holds about 20 Gallons, and it is filled with Water and Spruce Bark, which is boiled together; they then dip the netts of the Fishermen into it, and the Sails of their Boats to which it is a great preservation. This Pott is generally the property of one person, and it is seldom that you will find more than one of these Potts in a Creek or Cove. For dipping a set of Boat Sails they pay 3/6d. I am told the Owners have made Fifteen Pounds in one season by Dipping! This is all clear profit, the Bark and firing not costing anything. I mention this circumstance of dipping to show in this particular the property of the Spruce Tree. (Barking 130-131).

The word bled over into local toponymy. In 1905, Charles Tessier advertised land for rent in St. John's at a spot named "Barking Kettle Field" (Land 1), as an example. The memory of this use is retained today in place names like Barking Kettle Pond in Portugal Cove-St. Phillip's, Bark Pot swimming hole in Flatrock, and The Old Bark Pot Municipal Heritage Site in Ferryland.

Traditional NL Barking Recipes and Practice

Late April and early May were barking days in many communities, and the equipment required was not complicated: the barking kettle "an iron pot that resembles a witch's cauldron, or a kerosene drum cut in half" (Ryan 9), a flour barrel tub, a puncheon or a half puncheon, and a piggin for dipping out the bark.

The exact mixture of materials used to tan sails varied over time and from community to community, and it could contain a combination of ingredients including red ochre, cod oil, urine, seawater, beeswax, and/or bark extracts. The combination of ochre and oil added to the weight of the canvas but "sails dressed by this method are durable, supple, and waterproof so that they do not become stiff and heavy in wet weather" (Worth para. 8). Codner (1996) records the mixture used in Torbay as "a heated

mixture of paton bark, tar and cod oil” (31). The cod oil was added as a softener which would keep the twine supple as the barking mixture cured. Traps were barked long with manilla trap ropes and anchor ropes, and would be left for a couple of days where possible.

On the south coast of Newfoundland, where thick spruce bark could be obtained in Facheux Bay, black spruce bark was desired but red and white spruce bark was used at times (Wells 2). Often, fishermen made do with what they had, and tweaked their own mixtures.

In 1980, Rev. Albert Holmes reminisced about his father barking a codtrap in the Springdale of his youth for the *Newfoundland Quarterly*:

“Barking” was a homemade do-it-yourself process. Bark or rind of certain trees was boiled in a large iron pot, making a dark brown or deep wine concoction into which rope, twine or canvas as other materials were placed. The material received a rich color that not only preserved the material but, especially the nets, were made less obvious in the water (Holmes 60).

The process was described in a 1964 article similarly:

Fishermen the world over have to take time out for ‘barking the twine’ before they lower their fishnets into the sea. The barking kettle is set to boil and filled with bark and water, and when it is well and truly boiled, the liquid is thrown into the barking pot and fishermen pass their nets through it, staining them a deep tan. Barking the twine preserves the nets from corrosion in the sea (Barking the Twine 18).

The work of barking nets was often a family affair, as members of the Parsons family of Change Islands told the local newspaper in 2017:

“We always did it in May,” Bruce Parsons explained, “they were soaked in the bark and then the nets were hung upon racks built from the bottom of the garden and up the hill. If you didn’t do it you would only get a year out of the trap.”

Wayne Parsons, a brother to Bruce says that when he was a child there was a gallows – a tall structure to hang the traps on – up on the hill just above where the flakes and stages once stood on the underside of the cliff below.

Another brother, the oldest, Edward remembers the gallows as well. A gallows – also called a net horse – was a large wooden frame that nets were hung on to dry.

“The first one up lit the fire,” Margaret Parsons said of the last generation to use it. “Max (her late husband) or George, whoever was up first would start the fire, as early as 4 o’clock in the morning” (Parsons).

The boiling of the mixture of bark and nets was an important part of the process to help preserve the twine. A.F. O'Brien, of Cape Broyle, noted circa 1968:

Usually two large oil drums are set up in a fireplace on the beach. Bark is dumped into each drum and then they are filled with salt water. Then the fire is lit and the mixture is boiled. The different parts of the trap are put into large 'punchins' and the bark poured over them. When each punchin is filled, they are covered with a sawed-off punchin and allowed to work for a day or so. The trap is then taken and spread on the wharf to dry (“Bark” 1990).

Preparations for tanning were usually made near the shoreline next to the fishing premises. In Muddy Hole, located in Hermitage Bay on Newfoundland’s south coast, large rocks near the fishing stages provided a good location for the tanning process:

A fire was lit under an iron tan pot full of fresh water. Added to the water were small pieces of black spruce bark and heated until boiling point was reached. Black spruce bark was desired but red and white spruce bark was used at times as well. Thick spruce bark was obtained from large spruce trees in nearby Facheux Bay. Once boiled, the sappy like solution was put in puncheons or half-puncheon containers ready for the next step. Added to the hot water were brown chunks of catechu. Stirring with a paddle or slice continued for some time until the catechu was completely dissolved. Catechu was purchased locally by the pound. Some fishermen in Muddy Hole added baking soda to the tan mixture as it was supposed to make the tan more absorbent in the cotton twine of the nets. Once ready, the herring net or salmon net was placed in the tan mixture,

completely submerged, and left overnight. After taking the nets out of the tan, they were hung on a rail or net beam connected to the fishing stage and left to completely dry before placing in the ocean again. The whole tanning process was quite labour intensive but absolutely necessary to extend the life of the nets (Wells 2).

The use of “catechu” or “cutch” was another option for sailworkers - a type of tree bark extract which was imported to Newfoundland and Labrador from the Victorian period onward. *McAlpine's Newfoundland Directory* for 1894 to 1897 (151) references St. John's merchant John Steer as a dealer in “Pitch, Tar Oakum, Resin Cutch, Lime, and Ochre.” Merchant Colin Campbell of St. John's advertised in the April edition of the *Evening Telegram* in 1908 that he was wholesaling “Fisher-Lad” brand cutch, available in both blocks and slabs, “pure and unadulterated” which had recently arrived via the steamship *Carthaginian*. An 1861 notice on the front page of *The Daily Tribune* advertised:

The above Extract of Hemlock Bark is now being extensively used for BARKING NETS AND TWINES, and we have pleasure in recommending it to our planters and fishermen, feeling assured that they will find it much cheaper and stronger than than any other barking material. The following testimonial speaks for itself - “We have tried THE “LION” EXTRACT, with nets, twine, and sail canvas, and we are highly satisfied with it. We believe it will put Cutch to one side entirely.” Capt. Blandfor (than whom there is, in our opinion, no higher authority) gives us permission to state that he can confidently recommend the “Lion” Extract. He has used it, and considers it very superior to Cutch, at about half the cost, besides the fact that there is much less trouble with it. The Extract is put up in barrels of about 500 lbs., and can be obtained from CLIFT, WOOD & Co (“Tanning extract”).

While barking and the use of cutch (and other preservatives such as red ochre) lingered well into the 1950s, changes in techniques began half a century earlier. In 1907, the Harbour Grace firm of Munn & Co were assisting fishermen by letting them use their steam boiler for tanning nets:

MESSRS. MUNN & Co. have fitted up on their premises a plant for barking or tanning their cod-traps and other netting, sails, etc. Formerly this work was done by the use of barking pots, and latterly the tannery did the work of tanning the

nets. The boiler used at Messrs. Munn & Co's. for heating oil has been put into requisitions, and the steam therefrom heats the tan or bark and the nets are steeped in puncheons. The arrangement is a great time-save and is found to be of great convenience (Harbor Grace 6).

In 1914, the Colonial Cordage Company in St. John's was advertising herring nets in the *Newfoundland Quarterly* that were "barked for preservation, not merely dyed like other cheap Nets" (Fishery Gear 23). It marked the beginning of the end for the traditional bark and bark pots. In 1923, it was lamented in a local newspaper that, "Those old barking kettles, and the old customs which they served, and which they represented, have all departed and with them has departed also the old St. John's which we saw sixty years ago, and in their place have sprung up the new St. John's which we have to-day" (Morris 7).

Towards the turn of the century in Torbay there were two privately-owned barking pots which were made available to fishermen for a fee of one dollar per season (Codner 31). Turns were reserved by placing half a longcard-load of spruce or fir boughs behind the crews which arrived earlier. These boughs were later used to place the barked gear on during transportation. One of the bark pots was owned by William Martin and located near the present post office. The other was owned by Paddy Thorne and located at Gallows Cove.

By the 1940s, new techniques for twine manufacture meant that fishermen could buy their twine pre-treated:

In the twine department different sizes of twines are made for salmon, seal and herring nets. The various kinds of nets are made on special netting machines. When they are completed they are taken to the barking room where they are passed through vats containing a solution made from cutch, which is the outer bark of a tree which grows in Burma. Barking preserves the wearing qualities of the nets, thus making them last longer. After being removed from the barking solution, the nets are thoroughly dried and then sent to the parcelling room, where they are wrapped and shipped to various firms in the island. These firms then sell them to the fishermen (Manuel 129).

By the mid-century, the tanning of nets was no longer necessary, as nylon twine replaced cotton twine in fishing nets. Later, mono-filament line was introduced that had practically an unlimited life span (Wells 2).

Barking Canvas for Clothing

A similar barking process was also used for the colouring of canvas for wearable use. In 1955, one Newfoundland veteran of the First World War reminisced:

At last the great day had arrived, Saturday, October 3. We “fell in” after the midday meal and complete with greatcoats and a large haversack of white duck which had been subjected to a barking kettle to simulate the color of khaki (we still had no head-dress) and marched away from Pleasantville (Skirving 185).

In Labrador, loosely fitted pull-over hooded jackets called cossacks would be barked at certain times of the year. Cindy Colosimo Robbins of the Labrador Artisans Co-operative describes the reasons behind barking cossacks:

Cossack would be made out of cotton duck which is white, which is great camouflage in the winter but in the fall you want a darker colour, and they barked the cossacks. And the local ladies tell us they would also bark them because it would hide the dirt, you know, as the cossack got older and got a bit grubby and the dirt wasn't coming out. If you barked it, it looked like new again (Colosimo Robbins).

It was important to strain the bark from the pot and keep the fabric moving in the barking solution, otherwise the colour would collect in certain areas more than others. According to an oral history interview with Kathleen O'Brien of West St. Modeste, Labrador:

When your bark is completed you take it off your stove and strain it with cheesecloth or pantyhose or some kind of a cloth. All the dust into that then will be strained out because if you don't strain it all the dust from the bark, from the trees, will get in your cotton duck and make a mess on it. So then, when that's strained off you put it in a bucket or a tub, whatever you have, and add your cotton duck while your water is hot and keep turning, keep turning the cotton

duck over so as the material won't go spotty. So do that until the water starts cooling down, and then after so many hours, only leave it in so many hours. If you leave it in all night all the bark will lodge on the material in different spots and it'll be darker in some spots and then lighter so to have it all the one thing you just keep stirring it over (O'Brien).

Leather Work

Running parallel to the craft of barking nets, sails, and canvas was the practice of using similar techniques and materials to tan hides into usable leather. Fowler (2017) defines sealskin bark tanning thusly:

Bark tanning is a process by which you collect pieces of bark and twigs and branches and what not from trees that are indigenous to the area.... You get your seal pelts and... they're stretched over frames and scraped off. All the oil and fat and everything is scraped off. Then you use a pond in the area and the pelts are submerged in this pond for a number of weeks. That helps to de-hair the pelts. What you're left with is, ultimately, leather and then that leather is treated with this slurry of birch bark and var and fir. That's what actually tans the material. The leather that you get from that is absolutely incredible and it can be any number of different thicknesses depending on the age of the animal that was harvested. There's a thinner type of that leather and that's what's been used for skin boots.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, we can see different leather making skills that ultimately would meet and inform each other: Indigenous and European skin-working traditions.

Indigenous Leather Making

Some of the earliest evidence of bark tanning in Newfoundland and Labrador comes from the Dorset culture who lived near Port Au Choix dating back to at least 2140 BP. An archaeological survey by M. A. P. Renouf and T. Bell suggests that based on pollen and chironomid insect data, as well as tools uncovered from the Phillip's Garden sites,

that sealskin processing occurred in the area between 2200 BP and 1400 BP (Renouf and Bell 2008).

Seals hunted in the area would be taken to be processed to be turned into leather. The sealskin would be cleaned of meat, and degreased using *ulu* and blunt scrapers to press the oil out. They would be stretched on a frame, and softened by chewing or stamping on the skin. If the skin were to be used as boot soles, summer shoes, or coverings for a *Kajak* or *umiak*, the hair would need to be removed (Kobayashi Issenmen 1997). The hides would be soaked in a pond for a period of time in order to loosen the hair so that it could be easily scraped off. Fat tanning appears to be more common among the Inuit, however, plant tanning was also used. Depilated sealskins might be soaked in a solution of bark and salt in order to preserve and waterproof them, as well as add colour. The colour would depend on the type of bark which was used. Alder bark has been used across by Inuit the Arctic to obtain a reddish-brown colour:

Sealskin is colored red in a more thorough manner. After depilation has taken place, the skins are sewn together in a sack, the grain side inward. A very strong decoction of alder bark, with the bark, is poured into the sack. The sack is sewn together and is thrown into the yurt. When somebody has time, he picks up the sack, puts it on a bed of wood and beats it with a wooden club. The sack is treated in this manner several times until the red color has permeated through (Hatt and Taylor 16).

Mi'kmaq used the fat tanning method of making leather, in which a mixture of animal offal and fat is applied in order to preserve the leather (Wallis 1955). The skins are then rubbed and scraped. While smoke was often used to colour the hide, there is some historical evidence of soaking in a bark solution to apply colour:

Practically every pair of moccasins I observed worn by them was dyed red, whether made of caribou-skin or of seal-skin. To obtain the red color they soak the hide in water impregnated with spruce, pine, or alder bark, during the process of tanning (Speck 36).

There is little evidence of the hide-working methods of the Beothuk, but some authors believe that their traditions would have been similar to those of the Mi'kmaq. Their clothing was made predominantly of caribou skins, which would be tanned using a combination of brains, and other animal offal, stretched over frames to dry, and then

smoked (Marshall 1996). Beothuk clothing would then be covered in a mixture of grease and ochre which helped to waterproof and preserve them. According to Lieutenant Buchan who led a search for the Beothuk in 1810:

They also had leggings, moccasins, and cuffs, the whole made of the deer skin, and worn with the hair side next the body, the outside lackered with oil and red ochre, admirably adapted to repel the severity of the weather (Howley et al 86).

The Innu of Labrador also practiced the fat tanning and smoking method of leather making (Armitage 1985). However, there is evidence that they used plant dyes to paint designs on their clothing. (Burnham 1992).

In the 1970s, the Federation of Newfoundland and Labrador Indians purchased the former Newfoundland Tanneries plant in Carbonear and reopened it as Elnu Wawsauktaw Ltd. The plan for this tannery was to process moose, caribou, and seal skins using traditional Mi'kmaq methods which would then be sold to the Micmac Arts and Crafts Association of Nova Scotia, as well as delivering processed skins to an organization in Conne River which would make slippers, mitts, and belts. ("Elnu Wawsauktaw Ltd" 1977). By the mid 1990s this company had closed its doors.

European and Settler Leather Making

European leather making dates possibly as far back as 3000 BCE. The Romans used oak bark for tanning animal hides, a technique that would carry on for centuries (Legner para 4). An English publication from 1694 gives the following instructions for preparing an *ouse* or *ooze* (an infusion of bark) in a *lech* (a pit for barking):

The Ouse is made thus: Take sifted Bark a Skuttle-full, that is, Two Bushels to a Vat of Lech Ouse; let it stand Three days, 'till it gets a Head, then draw it off. Lately a Company of Gentlemen have made a Stock for Improvement of Tanning with Birch-Bark, and they pretend to make the Leather look brighter, be more serviceable, and be tann'd in much shorter time than formerly (Houghton 1).

Variations in bark used in the tanning process yielded different results, but oak remained a favourite of tanners, in part due to its resinous qualities. The following set of directions for a lime-water and oak bark ooze was printed in 1778:

An infusion of any strongly-astringent vegetable will serve to tan leather, so far as to prevent its rotting; but if this vegetable does not contain a good deal of gum-resin, it will not answer for enabling it to keep out water: and hence it is that oak-bark, which is more abundant in the gummy resinous part than any of our common indigenous astringents, is preferred to all other substances for the purpose of tanning. The tanners prepare their bark by gently drying it on a kiln, and grinding it into a very coarse powder. They then either use it in the way of infusion, which is called ooze; or they strew the dry powder between the layers of hides and skins, when these are laid away in the tan-pits. The ooze is made by macerating the bark in common water, in a particular set of holes or pits, which, to distinguish them from the other holes in the tan-yard, are termed letches (Macbride and Pringle 113).

When the first tannery was established in Virginia in 1630, the industry centered around the use of abundant hemlock bark, though the continued use of oak and chestnut was common as time went on (Legner para 4). An early nineteenth century account gives the reasoning for the use of chestnut in Carolina:

On the employment of the wood and bark of the Chesnut [sic] tree in dyeing and tanning. - The bark of the chesnut tree contains twice as much tanning matter as oak bark, and nearly twice as much colouring matter as logwood. The colouring substance of chesnut bark is to that of Campeachy logwood exactly as 1,857 to 1. Leather prepared with this substance is more firm and solid, and yet more supple. This bark is the best substance for making ink: mixed with iron it becomes a bluish black. The liquor drawn from this bark appears blue at the outside, like indigo; but it gives on paper the finest black. In dyeing it has a greater affinity for wool than sumach has, and in other respects it differs very little from sumach and gallnuts. The colour obtained from this substance is unchangeable by air and light (“On the employment”).

Manufacturers varied their ooze recipes based on availability of materials, cost, and desired outcomes. The enormous consumption of bark for tanning by the mid

nineteenth century was already having an impact on local forest stocks in North America, as this 1856 Ohio article attests:

It appears to us that our tanneries should now be devoting some attention to the cultivation of some shrubs for tanning purposes, the annual crops of which would be sufficient for their business. The hemlock and oak forests are fast disappearing, and when they are gone the tanners must seek some substitute. Young blackberry bushes ground up fine are excellent for tanning fine calf-skin for upper leather (“Tanning”).

Tanning as an industry in Newfoundland did not begin until the late 1800s. There were a number of leather workers and shoemakers in the 1860s, and by 1870 a Mr. O'Regan operated a small works in his St. John's backyard while James Browning ran a small tannery on Gower Street. One writer to the *The Star And Conception Bay Semi-Weekly Advertiser* wrote, in 1873:

One of the ideas forcibly suggested to my mind was that of establishing manufactories. It cannot be denied that much may be done in this way. A large business could be carried on in the tanning of leather and the manufacture of boots and shoes, and employment thus afforded to hundreds of our people. No country affords better facilities for the successful operation of these branches of industry. Skins of almost every description can be had in abundance, while the votaries of St. Crispin¹ are fully up to all that is required in ingenuity and mechanical skill (Terra Nova 2).

By February of 1882, the Campbell Tannery in St. John's was taking orders for “Grain, Wax, Sole Leather and Splits” as well as stating they would offer “Highest Cash Price Paid for Hides” (Campbell 3). The number of tanneries blossomed in the 1880s, largely in tandem with the shoe and boot making industry. Commercial tanneries such as this were most likely importing the required tannins; a 1885 notice in the *Evening Telegram* advertised 300 bags of oak bark up for auction, as an example (“Auction Sales” 1).

Both the tanneries and the local shoe manufacturers went into decline early in the 20th century as they could not compete with imported goods. Experiments with small-scale tanneries continued throughout the twentieth century, without notable commercial

¹ St. Crispian and St. Crispinian, patron saints of cobblers, shoemakers, and leather-workers (Farmer 117).

success (Tanneries 339). In the 1970s, the Carino Co. was operating from South Dildo, processing seal skin leather for export.

Sealskin Boot Making

At the start of the twentieth century, there were several attempts to create a commercial industry around the tanning of locally acquired seal skin. Andrew Thompson was involved in a number of these attempts, starting with his West End tannery, which was producing seal skin leather for the local manufacturers of boots at least by 1902:

MADE OF SEAL SKIN.—The Newfoundland Boot and Shoe Factory has recently turned out boots made of the seal skins manufactured by Mr. Thompson at his West End tannery. The result is highly satisfactory (Local 4).

Thompson experimented with using sealskin leather for gentleman's coat collars (At the West 6), and by 1910 seems to have moved on to manage the Sudbury Waterproof, Seal & Leather Manufacturing Co. Ltd. The company was featured at a local exhibition that year, and was written up by the *Evening Telegram*:

This is one of the most interesting booths in the rink. It is also a very pretty one, neatly decorated and illuminated, and the goods it contains inspire the particular attention of the spectator inasmuch as they demonstrate to what a variety of uses the skins of the Newfoundland seals can be devoted to show how beautiful they are when properly processed. This the manager, Mr. Thompson, does in a way which ensures a ready market for the valuable leathers made by the company. The skins of the harp and hood seal are tanned and are put up in great variety, being used in the manufacture of boots, gloves, purses, etc. The leatherware is of the best and most durable quality, and the presence of the factory in our midst will enhance the value of the native seal skin not alone locally but in the marts of the world where its usefulness is now discerned. The fur dressed for ladies and gent's cloaks and coats rivals the best South Sea seal skin, and the local manufacture bears comparison with the same manufacture either in England or Canada (Exhibition 4).

The plant shut down in 1914.

Outside of St. John's, the local manufacture of sealskin boots remained an important part of rural life, particularly on the Great Northern Peninsula and along the coast of Labrador. On the Great Northern Peninsula, the sealskin boot tradition has been heavily influenced by Inuit tradition, as Inuit married into settler families (Firestone 1994). Along the Strait of Belle Isle, sealskin boots were made using the same designs as Inuit skin boots, which were barked as this was considered more aesthetically pleasing than fur boots (Firestone 1992).

The sewing of sealskin boots was considered to be women's work on the Great Northern Peninsula, but the preparation of the skins was left to the men. The rinds of spruce and fir would be used in the barking solution and left to soak for up to a month, resulting in a yellow colour. Variations in water, bark, or drying time meant the difference between a good and a bad skin. Elijah Mitchelmore of Green Island Cove recalls,

My mother, Annie - she was a Martin from Conception Bay - wouldn't make a boot unless the skin was perfect. It had to have the right texture. You'd hold it up to the light, and if it was opaque, it wasn't a good skin. If it wasn't opaque and was evenly coloured, you had a good skin. (Mitchelmore, qtd in Bock 33).

The Flower's Cove St. Barnabas Anglican Church has a unique history closely linked to sealskin boot production. Under the guidance of Canon and Mrs. Richards, funding to build this church and keep it going was generated through the sale of locally made sealskin boots. The basement was set up as a workshop where women from the community would gather to sew the sealskin (Flower's para 1). Wilfred Grenfell (234) wrote:

In connection with the cooperative store at Flower's Cove, an industry of making sealskin boots has sprung up, and fifteen hundred pairs were exported this summer (1906). Around these small industries it is possible to congregate women and children in the winter for the purpose of better education.

In spite of these experiments in mass production, bark tanning of sealskin and bootmaking in the region remained a cottage industry. These boots were for personal use as well as for sale to outfits such as the Hudson's Bay Company. In the 1930s, Czech-American anthropologist Oscar Waldamar Junek (46) observed the following:

In the "barking" or tanning of hides for leather several steps are necessary before the final product is reached. All fatty particles are first removed with a knife. The skin is next stretched on a frame similar to that used in sun-drying, and afterwards immersed in water with the hair side up for about three weeks, at which point the hair is scraped off by means of a raspfile. A light salting follows; the skin is taken down from the frame and put into a "small pickle." It is then washed thoroughly in lukewarm water. Finally, it is stretched on a frame again for two more days. In this last drying care must be observed to keep the skin in the shade lest the sun turn the hide black. From this final product sealskin boots are made. The Hudson's Bay Company pays about two dollars and fifty cents for each tanned hide. If there is no time for either curing or tanning when the seals are first caught, the green skins are heavily salted, folded, and stored away until they can be taken care of.

The process of drying, tanning, stretching and barking the leather may take six to seven months and the busiest time has always been in the fall and early winter in time for Christmas (Still 23). In a July 2008 recording from the Coastal Heritage Collection, Ruby Cabot of West St Modeste, Labrador, tells Gertie Fowler how she makes skin boots. Ruby was taught to make skin boots by her husband's grandmother, Aunt Lou Cabot. Cabot describes the process, and notes that different types of bark would produce different colours, as noted above in the section on Indigenous leather making:

Ruby Cabot: You cut some little birch bark sticks. Also there is another kind of a stick which is an alder. Now I prefer the ah... birch because the birch got a more reddish color.

Gertie Fowler: So your seal skin would be a nicer color.

Ruby Cabot: Yeah, it would be reddish, it would be a nicer colour. The birch gives you a nicer color, and then they uses alders too. But the alders is not so nice a colour, it's more or less a darker greenish colour.

Gertie Fowler: Okay.

Ruby Cabot: But anyway, you make You put it on the stove, you puts your ah..... puts that on the stove, you boils it, for about an hour or so until the bark

comes out of the rhine [rind] and then you takes the bark and then you goes and puts it into a larger container, that's 'fer your skin now 'fer the bark and then you puts some salt in your bark. It's almost the same as dying a cloth. The only thing is your dying the seal skin (Cabot).

Contemporary Process

Bark tanning has largely remained a cottage industry in Newfoundland and Labrador, and most tanners today practice more contemporary tanning methods, ordering their supplies online. However, there are still a few practitioners who are using or experimenting with bark tanning and barking.

Clare Fowler has been researching and experimenting with bark tanning for a number of years. She learned the methods by researching sources online, however she cautions that the majority of the sources available are from the United States and Europe, and there are very little Canadian sources. Her problem with a lot of these sources is that it is expected that you have some familiarity with the process, and as a result, they are not made for beginners to use as a guide. She also travelled to the Great Northern Peninsula with a friend and interviewed some practitioners who are still making traditional bark tanned sealskin boots. She says:

They were really excited about it! At first they were a bit dubious because I don't know if they - I think the first person we talked to was - he was dubious because he wasn't quite sure that we weren't anti-sealers. So, once he got over that that we were - and my friend was also from the Northern Peninsula so that kind of added a little bit of credibility, because he could go back and find her family kind of thing. So that was very valuable and very wonderful. And once we established that, yeah, no we were legitimately interested in this because we wanted to continue the tradition, then the floodgates of information opened. And he was - well, they both were. They were very happy about it (Fowler 2017).

Fowler describes the steps she took during her barking process. She purchases her skins already fleshed, with the oils already removed, and salt brined from Carino Co. She says this helps her speed up the process. Once she receives the skins, she places them in a 5 gallon bucket with brine which helps preserve them until she's ready to begin bark tanning.

Once she is ready to begin, she removes the skins from the bucket and soaks them in water to remove the salt and bring the PH balance back to normal. Once the PH is back to normal, she puts them in a large 15 gallon garbage bin with a cup of lye solution, which she adjusts based on the type of water she is using. The lye solution swells the skin and allows the hair follicles to be removed easily. She tests these once a day to see how easily the hair is scraped from the skin. Once it is ready, she says she throws it over a log and with a scraping tool removes the hair. Once it has been depilated, the PH needs to be adjusted again, so the skin is once again soaked in water. She says she has soaked her hides in brackish water at the mouth of a brook where it met the ocean. Unfortunately, she left it too long and the hides were not usable, but she still considers it a success because she knows how to adjust for next time. Fowler believes this method will be more convenient as it means she will not have to prepare another solution and will help to simplify the process.

At this point, Fowler begins to prepare her bark tanning solution. Last time she barked she used spruce bark because it was readily available, though this year she says she plans to use birch bark. The different barks have different levels of tannin in them which affects the colour but also the suppleness of the leather. She says:

With the spruce bark it was like this really deep, bloody red, and it smelled just like spruce. It was really really nice. But it was really, not brittle but I guess it's less supple than the birch tanned stuff I'd gotten on the Northern Peninsula a couple years ago (Fowler 2020).

To make the bark tanning solution, Fowler fills another large garbage bucket with bark and hot water and lets it steep for five or six weeks. The warmer the weather, the better the tannin extraction from the bark. She has this solution steeping while she prepares the hide so both are ready to use at the same time. When it has steeped long enough, she siphons it off to a clean bucket. When she prepares the tannin bath for the skins, she does not use full strength bark solution. Fowler likens this to baking a cake in an oven at too hot a temperature:

If you were baking a cake and the temperature was too high, you'd bake the outside but your inside would be uncooked. So, if the tanning solution is too strong the same sort of thing happens, where you just get this outer level of

tanning but the inside hasn't been tanned properly, or it hasn't gone all the way through and then your leather is just no good because it'll rot out (Fowler 2020).

She recommends one part tannin to two parts water. She soaks the skins in this solution for about a week, checking periodically to see how it is processing. When this is done, the tanning solution is strengthened to two parts tannin and one part water. She says that as you go, you increase the strength of the solution based on what colour you want your hide to be and the thickness of the hide. Sealskin is relatively thin so it requires less time in the tanning solution than if you were tanning moose hide.

Fowler hopes that this information can be recorded in a step-by-step process that can be made publicly accessible somewhere online, so people who are interested in learning how to bark tan can keep the tradition alive:

The ultimate goal for that would have it be logged and documented, you know, in the MUN archives somewhere so that it was never lost, to have sort of a document that was accessible, and accessible on a number of levels. Like, one, people could get their hands on it, but also then they could understand what was happening and be able to reproduce it, you know, years down the road, so they wouldn't have such a hard time trying to find somebody who could still do this. I mean, the gentleman we talked to, he was probably in his mid 70s. Who knows how much longer he's going to be able to do it? And the same thing with the woman we talked to about the boots. I mean, maybe she was, and I don't want to be ageist or what have you, but you know, she was definitely in her 60s, maybe even a little bit older. And again, how much longer are these people going to be doing it? (Fowler 2017)

Fowler laments the lack of younger practitioners and credits the misinformation of anti-sealing groups with the break in transmission of this traditional knowledge:

And part of what they were saying back to us is that they couldn't find young people who were even interested in it. Because, I suppose, you know, your parents always want a great life for you, and sometimes that great life, they don't see the great life as, you know, what's in front of them in that particular region or area. For my part? A beautiful life for me would be being on the Northern Peninsula and working with seal leather and seal fur and making it and then creating beautiful things out of it. But I know that's valuable. I don't need

someone else to tell me that that's valuable. And I feel like there's been a number of generations, especially in the sealing industry, where there have been a lot of groups communicating that it's not valuable anymore (Fowler 2017).

When she practices these heritage skills, she involves her son. Fowler finds it interesting when he shares this information with others. She says that these kinds of skills are oriented towards families and communities as the more people involved, the easier the work is to do. She hopes that safeguarding and practicing these kinds of skills will aid in community building.

Susan Furneaux operates Black Hen Studio in Conception Harbour and has been working with natural dyes to explore the settler history of Newfoundland and Labrador. She forages for local dye plants and incorporates sustainable practices into her work. She has also experimented with bark tanning. She says:

I bark tanned a goat hide and a seal skin a couple of years ago. I found quite a bit of research online but none of it was historical or local. Many folks in the states are still using bark tanning with oak and other trees. I just used spruce instead of oak and it was fine. It wasn't difficult or smelly (as you would think) it was actually quite satisfying, especially the stage where you peel the hair off when it comes out of the pond. The tanning solution also smells glorious. Now is the time you begin the solution for maximum yield (Furneaux).

Furneaux also uses spruce bark in her barking solution, though she adds that she has experimented with using other barks as well:

It is very simple; just spruce bark, we may add a bit of cherry or juniper if we have it and water, mostly spruce. The key is to cut down the tree at the right time of year for maximum tannins and immediately strip the bark to the wood. The tannins leach out very quickly so it needs to be fresh bark from cut trees. You need a fair bit, we need to mend a few fences so will use the stripped wood for longers, removing the bark keeps wood from rotting so quickly. It is amazing when working in traditional homesteading methods how everything depends a little on everything else in each season...magical how it all flows (Furneaux).

It is not just the island portion of Newfoundland and Labrador that is keeping the tradition of barking alive. The Labrador Artisans Co-operative has been experimenting

with barking in a line of fabric products including everything from aprons to scarves that they have been developing for tourists which tell the story of Labrador and its people. Cindy Colosimo Robbins says that the idea for the project grew out of oral histories they had completed with seniors in Southern Labrador:

We also wanted to learn about natural dyes because we knew that barking was a traditional dye in the local area. We knew a little bit about that because we'd also been involved in an oral history project and craft history projects and we wanted to use barking (Colosimo Robbins).

The Co-operative brought Anna Murphy, a student of Susan Furneaux, to teach its members on the use of natural dyes. From this, the Co-operative was able to develop a line of products which were barked using the recipe supplied in an oral history interview with Kathleen O'Brien. They selected barking as a focus because of the way it resonated with visitors. According to Colosimo Robbins:

As we were going along, we found more and more that the barking - at the beginning we had tote bags that were barked, and we weren't barking other products. But as we went along, we discovered that barking was a story that the visitors are really interested in and it's got a strong tie to the local women, because they, and fishermen, would use the barking technique to dye their nets and the women would use it to dye cossacks... They also used barking to tan seal skins for skin boots. So this was a technique that was being used in the local area (Colosimo Robbins).

The recipe that the Co-operative is using calls for alder bark, though Colosimo Robbins states that they have been experimenting with other barks as well, like Fowler and Furneaux. She reiterates the variety of colours that are able to be produced by the use of different barks:

The first recipe we heard was alder bark but we've used spruce bark, mostly because my husband swept up all the spruce bark from his wood pile and presented it to us in a box. We talked to another lady - and our best pot of bark was one that got forgotten out in the porch for many weeks. It was a really great colour by the time we got it back in (Colosimo Robbins).

Colosimo Robbins describes alder bark as the traditional choice because of the landscape of Southern Labrador. In the area that the Co-operative operates, the communities are on the water and the area is mostly barrens. Colosimo Robbins notes that a woman from the Pinware River Valley used birch bark as it was more accessible there.

The Co-operative has promoted their barked products and celebrated the tradition of barking at craft fairs and expos as far away as Ottawa. They have used traditional materials and traditional methods in innovative ways by dip-dyeing with the barking solution and incorporating Japanese Shibori dyeing methods, which uses folding to create what Colosimo Robbins calls “fancy high-end tie-dyeing.”

All of the contemporary practitioners of bark tanning are finding their own way, experimenting with and innovating on traditional materials and techniques in an effort to maintain the skills and knowledge of bark tanning while enabling them to tell their own stories.

Conclusion

Bark tanning and the use of similar techniques for the colouring of materials has a long history in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is a good example of different skills traditions coming together to create something new, as well as being a skill that continues to reinvent itself and find new uses and applications.

Laurie Pitcher of Heart’s Content says that working with sealskin allows her to carry on a family legacy of seal hunters and sealskin workers:

Well, for me, my father and grandfather and husband, my sons, his parents, grandparents and whatever were traditional seal hunters. And one of our sons is actually a taxidermist. So, when we buy all of the fox fur we use for trimmings, we buy those from a fur farm here in Newfoundland, and our son tans those. So, it's kind of like a family tradition, and it's all pure Newfoundland. You don't get it anywhere else, and it's nice to be able to do something different (Pitcher).

There are some challenges in continuing this tradition. Pressure from anti-sealing groups and bans on seal products in certain countries, has resulted in a reduction in

availability of pelts. In order to continue this tradition, Pitcher echoes Fowler in the need for educating people and getting them interested in natural materials at an early age in order to show that these traditions are valuable ones to transmit to future generations:

For future generations it would be nice just to be able to continue the seal hunt, to continue to make sealskin products so that all of our - I've got three grandchildren and, well, one's only two and a half, but the other two older ones, one is eight and one is ten, they're interested. They like to come down and help Nan sew and put pieces together and stuff like that. I'm hoping that it's going to keep their interest as well because it's something that should be passed down for more and more generations to come (Pitcher).

If you have information on bark tanning or barking traditions in your community, contact ich@heritagenl.ca.

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