

Seal Skin Boot Making

Collector: **Gertie Fowler**

Contributor: **Ruby Cabot**

Gertie Fowler:

This is Gertie Fowler and I'm her in West St. Modeste today, with Ruby Cabot and Ruby is gonna explain to me the day, about how theah... seal skin boots are made.

Ruby Cabot:

Well, it starts of like this, the first thing you got to do is get the seal. (laughs)

Gertie Fowler:

That's right.

Ruby Cabot:

Off course, hey?

Yeah, usually we use an old harp seal skin, for the bottoms, which is the best seal skin because it's much thicker. Now you can use the bedlamer for the legs because that's much..... as you know much neater work right?

But anyway, the first thing you do is you get the seals which is a bedlamer or old harp, whichever. And you... you take the pelt off of them and you clean all the fat off and then if you need the bark skinned, well you take the skin as it is and you go to work and you put it in water and you let it what you calls, tint, for the hair to come off.

If you needs a skin with the hair on, like some people uses 'fer for mittens or legs of boots, you do not put them in the water to tint. You go to work and you wash your pelt, for to keep the hair on now, you wash the pelt, and you go to work and you put them into a weak pickle water, so let the pickle go out through to preserve the skin. This is one now with the hair on. You leave it there for a few days and then you take it out and you put it in a frame, you stretch it. You stretch it and you let it dry, because that's the one with the hair on.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

And after it gets dry, its preserved then for the backs of mittens or or the legs of the boots or whatever, now the other one for bark is a little bit more work. Because you have to take it, you have to put it into either a pond or large tub and you have to leave it there

for about, sometimes two weeks. And when you when you take it out of the pond, if you're able to tear off the hair, you know with no problem, will then it's ready to be tinted.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

So you just take one of those, little round ah.....knife and you scrape the hair off. That's for.... one is for the bark. When the hair all comes off, you go to work, and you either go in and you cut some bark rhines. You get some bark sticks..... bark sticks, I'm sorry, birch...

Gertie Fowler:

Yeah.

Ruby Cabot:

Birch bark

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

Sorry, birch bark sticks.

Gertie Fowler:

Hmmmm.

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 color. The birch gives you a nicer color, and then they use alders too. But the alders is not so nice a color, it's more or less ah..... darker greenish color.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

But anyway, you make You put it on the stove, you put your ah..... put that on the stove, you boil it, for about an hour or so until the bark comes out of the rhine 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.

Gertie Fowler:

So what do the salt do to it?

Ruby Cabot:

The salt keeps it.... preserves it, keeps it station. And you puts salt in this water and then you put your sealskin there and you rub.... you roll your seal skin over and over, so as the bark will fit in him, you know. The same as, for instance, you're dying a piece of material, exactly the same thing. And after it looks okay, you leave it there then for about an hour or so. But for every now and then, you're kind of hauling it up and lettin' it go down, so as any places that's not dyed. After it gets dyed satisfactory, after you look at it you know its okay, you take it out then you put it in a frame and you stretch it. Stretch it with all your might then. Whatever you can stretch it.

Gertie Fowler:

Hmmm.

Ruby Cabot:

You ties it in a frame and then puts it in a frame and you leaves it dry. Now it might take a week and it might take... you know if you get fine weather, well a week is okay, it'll dry out beautiful.

So now your skins are ready. So the next thing is now if you're gonna makes boots or mitts or whatever the case may be. Like the first thing you got to have then is a pattern.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

First thing you do then is cut out your pattern, if you haven't got your pattern but usually you find one from someone but usually we cuts out our pattern with brown paper or whatever. Some kind of paper. You cut out the pattern for your boots so I'll say.... I'll use boots, so there's a set of legs, now you got to be sure that they're wide enough down around the ankle. So like usually, you try to get a pat.... A set from somebody and then it's the tongue, and then it's the bottom.

Now there's two kind of bottom, is a round heel and a square heel. So therefore, you have to have whichever you prefer. If you wants a round heel, a round heel is the pleats going right around the heel and a square heel is the kinds of ... is about... what will I say about an inch, it comes down from the foot and then it's took and it's pleated on the bottom.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

So it's a round heel and a square heel. But anyway, you'd have to have whichever pattern whichever is round or a square. To me it don't matter, if I made both of 'em. That is your pattern, and then if you wants a furry leg, or if you wants bark legs you can cut it all out of the one seal skin. Or if you wants fur legs and a bark tongue on bottom, well you use skin with the fur on, and your bottom and tongue from the bark skin.

Gertie Fowler:

Hmm....hm...

Ruby Cabot:

Now, you're getting down to it, now you're , you got it cut out. It's like cutting out a dress or anything else, you got your material cut out. Now what I uses, the kind of thread I uses for making the sealskins is a new thread that came out, it's called sinu. Because it's no way that you bust a sinu. Now if you use the ordinary coarse sewing cotton, sometimes you have trouble, you know, you rub it with soap to stiffen it but you'll have trouble sometimes of breaking it.

Gertie Fowler:

Wouldn't hold up so good.

Ruby Cabot:

No wouldn't hold up so good. But if it's sinu, you got no trouble because..

Gertie Fowler:

What's that made from, then?

Ruby Cabot:

Sinu ... well ah... well it's a it's kind of a nylon and it's waxed.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

You buy it around anywhere to the craft shops because people uses it for making those little.... those mochasins that's what they uses, sinu, right?

And that sinu, you can get about three different three different threads out of it, like you can get one piece of sinu, you can split it three times.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

But anyway, that is the kind of thread you uses. First you dyes and makes the legs, number one. And then is the tongue. You puts the tongue in. And then you half your bottom, and you mark your bottom, half, from the heel to the toe. Now if he's a round heel, well okay, you just half the pattern, you know, you mark it and then you mark on your boot, same thing. You half your boot, you half the tongue and start with the heel.

If it's a square heel, well the first thing you got to do is make the heel on the bottom, before you touches goes to the boot. Make your heel and put 'em together. And then you start in. More or less you connect them fast to your boot because you wants to have everything even.

Gertie Fowler:

Sure.

Ruby Cabot:

So you connect your toe to the top of the pattern and the heel to the behind. So it centralized right?

Gertie Fowler:

Hmmmm.

Ruby Cabot:

Okay, now you got to start in at your boot. So there's ah.... there's ah....it's gonna be a lot of seal skin there and a small lot on the leg. You're gonna say, oh my, I'll never get all that puckered in. But you got to look at the seal skin and see what kind of little tucks you're gonna make, in order to be able to fit the skin in. Because you've got to mark it, you've got to keep everything in connection on both sides, right.

Gertie Fowler:

Hmm..... hmmm.

Ruby Cabot:

Now there's a special ah... what well I put it... there's a special knot that you've got to make for the tucks and it's no good for me to tell ya, I'd have to show ya.

Gertie Fowler:

Yup

Ruby Cabot:

It's something like, you go in through pick up your skin and you kind of go in around your your thread again and kind of haul it tight.

Gertie Fowler:

And that makes the pleat.

Ruby Cabot:

That makes the pleat.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

But anyway, you do that, when you got everything marked off on your boot. You know everything is fair, marked off, you start in... you pleat it around, when you get in around to the tongue, you should have your pleats put in. When you gets into the inside part of the tongue.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

And from the tongue, if you got a round heel now, you got to take an inch or an inch and a half from the center of the back of your boot, and mark it for the start, with the pleats for your heel.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

But from tongue now to this inch and a half, you got supposed to be directly straight. Directly even.

Gertie Fowler:

Yes

Ruby Cabot:

So you just do the ordinary sewing there. Then when ya comes to your heel again, you does the same thing you did with your toe in order to get ah... the tucks in.

Gertie Fowler:

Hmmmm.... Hmmmm

Ruby Cabot:

From the inch and a half to the center. And then same thing with a inch and a half on the other side, right?

Gertie Fowler:

Okay. Yup.

Ruby Cabot:

And that'll make your heel. But anyway you go right on around to your boot. Right on around your boot in that same pat.... in that same order, when you get outside you take the tongue, you do your tucking again. After you gets all that done, you turn your boot inside out and then you go over it. Now you start from your pleats, now you got to get every pleat and every tuck to catch it with your needle, you know and sew it over edge. Like for instance, you're gonna have your tucks right, some down , some up hey?

Gertie Fowler:

Hmm....

Ruby Cabot:

You got to get your you got to get your needle and you got to try to get the ones that down in under up to sew everything over edge. Take your time, it's longer to sew it down then to make the boot. 'Cause you got to watch out what you're doing.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

You go right around your boot like that, over edge, heel and all. When that's completed now you got to put heel strings in, to keep the heel up, the heel strings. So you take your fingers, your hand...

Gertie Fowler:

Yeah.

Ruby Cabot:

You shove 'em right down in your heel, and you form the ah.... you form the heel with your with your hand.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

And your needle then, you take your time, you go about no more then about ... oh.... I say, not a half an inch, you know a little more than a quarter of an inch and you take your time and you pick up every little pleat is there, and you go through with your needle until you get to the end of the pleat. Then you take your thread and you haul it tight, and you try to stop that one.

Now you go down about another quarter of an inch and you come backwards and you pick up again on the way back. Then you come again and you do that right until to you get to the top of your finger that you got the heel made.

Gertie Fowler:

Oh. Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

And that's what you call heel strings. And that's what keeps your heel up.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay, so when you pushes ya.....

Ruby Cabot:

Keeps the heel of your boots, so when you puts down... puts the boot on, he'll fit perfect around the heel,

Gertie Fowler:

Okay, yeah.

Ruby Cabot:

because it's the depth of your fingers, if you put it down

Gertie Fowler:

Yes Yes..... Yeah

Ruby Cabot:

It's the depth of your fingers

Gertie Fowler:

Yeah, I can see it.

Ruby Cabot:

And the fingers, when you puts 'em out, see back and forth, back forth, back forth, accordin's ya coming down, you're coming shorter right? Your boot is completed then, except ... except you got to put a binding on the top part and you can use seal skin if you wish or you can use cotton duck or you can use anything, you know, like for puttin' a string in

Gertie Fowler:

Sure.

Ruby Cabot:

to haul 'em tight.

Gertie Fowler:

Yup.

Ruby Cabot:

Well that'swell anyway that boot is completed. Once you does that, that boot is completed.

Now if you uses a square heel, you haven't got as much work with your boot. Because a square heel when he comes right around is right flush, so it's only this little section, which is down in under, inch and a half down. That got the few little pleats. So where you may put about twelve drawstrings through your heel with a round heel, you'd only have to put about three, for a square heel. See? So...

Gertie Fowler:

So now was ah... was those boots pretty well water proof?

Ruby Cabot:

Yes. Waterproof, yeah.

Gertie Fowler:

Yes maid.

Ruby Cabot:

Yeah, they were waterproof, so that's what, that's how the boot was made. That ah... and I mean you does the same one, the same time.

Now, some people uses two puts an insert into them. Usually they'll buy a ski-doo boot insert.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

Yeah know. Which is pretty warm or you'd make it out of duffle, so I guess, it's not much duffle around to buy so you use a skidoo insert.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay, like those felts.

Ruby Cabot:

The felts, yeah put into it, yeah like you know, you'd put a sock inside of that right?

But that's the way the boots goes.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay. So a nice bit of work, then?

Ruby Cabot:

Nice bit of work. Oh, yes.

Gertie Fowler:

How long how long would do you think it would take you to make a pair of?

Ruby Cabot:

If you was to sew, if you had your seal skin and everything, you know, all your material and everything. Well we were put off.... well I'll go with this one, we had a seal skin boot bagging course to the museum a few years ago, and ah.... we use to be there, I'd say it was a forty hour course.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

And ah.... I don't know how many we had. We must have had seven or eight people, six or seven people for sure, and we had our sealskin boots made, completed, when the course was finished.

Gertie Fowler:

So now.....

Ruby Cabot:

That's from cuttin' it out, to everything, plus we had to show the people how to do it. And they done it within that forty hour course, you know. But now like for some for meself, where I know what I'm doing or somebody else know what their doing, you'd ah....comfortably you'd make a boot in a day.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay

Ruby Cabot:

You know.

Gertie Fowler:

So ah...

Ruby Cabot:

But after a after a You know that'd be enough for one day, a boot.

Gertie Fowler:

One boot.

Ruby Cabot:

Yeah.

Gertie Fowler:

So who taught you now, how to do it?

Ruby Cabot:

My Aunt Lou Cabot.

Gertie Fowler:

Aunt Lou Cabot.

Ruby Cabot:

Aunt Lou Cabot, showed me how to do it.

Gertie Fowler:

How old were you then?

Ruby Cabot:

Oh.... I was nineteen when I got married, so I guess, I guess (laughs) I was only twenty, I guess.

Gertie Fowler:

Yeah. Just after you was married.

Ruby Cabot:

It was Aunt Lou that showed me how to make boots, it was Aunt Lou that showed me how to make the mitts, it was Aunt Lou that showed me how to make the cotton duck clothes.

Gertie Fowler:

Yes maid. Yeah. So she could do pretty well....

Ruby Cabot:

Well she did it all. She could fill out snowshoes, she could make snowshoes, fill 'em out and you know do the filling and....

Gertie Fowler:

So overall now, how many pairs of boots do you think you made?

Ruby Cabot:

Well, not as many boots as I did mitts.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

I don't know, I'd say overall I might have made, in my lifetime I might have made about twenty pair, maybe.

Gertie Fowler:
Okay.

Ruby Cabot:
Because I can remember making them for different people. Ya know, I can remember different ... but I'd say definitely twenty pair. But now mitts, I've made them.....

Gertie Fowler:
So do any pair stick out in your mind, that you made for anybody special. Did you make 're pair for anybody special?

Ruby Cabot:
I just I got a pair here now that I made for Pats.

Gertie Fowler:
Okay.

Ruby Cabot:
No, the way it was with it, I made them, I made them, right?

Gertie Fowler:
Yeah. One pair was no different then the

Ruby Cabot:
No. One pair was no different then the other.

Gertie Fowler:
Well, is that all you would have to add to your story, today.

Ruby Cabot:
That's all I would have to add ' fer the 'fer the boots yeah. Now, the mitts, now I've made plenty of mitts.

Gertie Fowler:
Yes

Ruby Cabot:
Plenty of them, I met them from children size up to adult size.

Gertie Fowler:
Yup. Okay.

Ruby Cabot:
And took pleasure into them, too. Now there's another kind of, another way too you can get sealskins... nice sealskins, like we use to go to work. I can remember one year we sent away from 35. Sent it to ah.... a place in ah.... Nova Scotia, Blue Mills, they called

it. And we got the real beautiful leather, and beautiful fur, 'ya know, right soft, ya know. But we can't clean it like it.

Gertie Fowler:

No. So that was.... that was probably factory cleaned?

Ruby Cabot:

Factory cleaned yup, yup. And that's what I made the mitts out of, mainly. Mitts was made out of that.

Gertie Fowler:

Oh, well.

Ruby Cabot:

But now I gave it up, lately because stiffness in me fingers.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.

Ruby Cabot:

Ya know, but I mean this is how it's completed.

Gertie Fowler:

Well I want to thank you very much for your memories, they were beautiful. You have a lot of information, there so.... thank you very much Ruby.

Ruby Cabot:

Yup so we're gonna get you to bring it up now and take the photograph of that and put it there on the table.

Gertie Fowler:

Okay.