

Tanning Industry in the Nineteenth Century

In the days when rural America produced countless cows, horses and sheep, what became of the hides was big business. Colebrook, like her surrounding towns, had several tanneries, more or less equally distributed around town. There was one in Colebrook Center in back of Abbott's house on Center Street, (2 Center Brook Road) another just south of the Massachusetts line in Colebrook River, one behind what is now Tom Bell's lumber mill, one by the outlet of Brookside Pond on Deer Hill, and there were others at various times during the nineteenth century.

There is a photo belonging to the Colebrook Historical Society showing a huge pile of hides stacked almost as high as the roof of the tannery itself. Although the location is not identified, we feel that in all likelihood it was the one behind Bell's mill.

I don't think there is an operating tannery left in Connecticut in the twenty-first century, but back in 1960, there was a pigskin tannery located in South Glastonbury that I worked in for a while. I had just finished college and had applied for a job at Pratt & Whitney in East Hartford in their cartographic department. There was one major problem however; there was a strike ongoing, and all production had been halted. I thought that I could outwait the strike, and took the only job available that I could find in the area, which happened to be at Roser's Tannery. I didn't look upon this employment as the best in the world, but at least it provided work in a recession period. Over the years however, I have come to regard my short time there as well spent, as it afforded me an opportunity to gain knowledge in a profession that even then was fading fast from the American countryside. This particular tannery still used a waterwheel, although as a supplement to electricity. As I said before, we specialized in pigskin only, but the process for all types of hides is quite similar.

A skin that has just been removed from the slaughtered animal first has the hair removed and then undergoes a process to remove the adhering tissue and fat. I have to warn you that the process is pretty disgusting, and is perhaps not for the weak-stomached! First of all the skins are left out in the open air to attract flies, which lay eggs all over the skins. These skins are then rolled as tightly as possible and packed into wooden barrels, which are then "headed" and set aside in a warm room for several weeks. The eggs that the flies laid become maggots and eat the tissue and fat. Interestingly, they will not touch the hide itself, unless of course, they are left too long. The knowledge as to when to take a sledgehammer and knock in the barrelhead is critical at this point. In the case of Roser's tannery, this operation was done in a special room having a cement floor that sloped toward the center, where there was a pit five or six feet deep with a diameter of some fifteen feet. The freed maggots spewed forth onto the sloping floor, the newly cleaned skins were pulled from the barrel and hosed down with a fire hose. The water and its cargo of wiggly hide cleaners washed into the pit, where it was emptied once a week by a large unmarked tanker truck that siphoned the contents of the pit and spirited the contents away. I asked the driver once where he took it, and he replied that it was going to a factory in Massachusetts where it was to be boiled and the fat skimmed off and made into Dial soap!

The cleaned hides are next placed into large wooden vats, or tubs with a strong solution of tannin, usually obtained from Hemlock bark. This preserves the hide and the process converts it into leather. When the hides are removed from the brine and dried,

they are very stiff; as a matter of fact, they are referred to as “stiff as a board” and to make them supple, are run through a device called a boarding machine that looks somewhat like a six-foot wide old-fashioned clothes wringer, but with ridges and grooves on the rollers that fit into one another. This process will leave the leather quite pliable and ready to be processed further. At this point the next step is determined by what the leather is slated to become: if for shoe leather or perhaps leather straps, belts or harness, it is run through a shaving machine. This consists of a rapidly spinning drum containing several curved knife blades not unlike curved ice skate blades. Immediately above this spinning cutter is another drum of equal size, but with a smooth surface. This last mentioned drum can be raised or lowered and the operator, tightly holding the skin, slowly feeds it above the whirling blades much the same as the old fashioned method of wringing water out of washed clothes. This operation determines the thickness of the finished leather.

Perhaps the hide is scheduled to become suede; in which case it is sent to a slitting machine. This machine cuts a thin slice off the top of the leather, called the grain. The thin grain leather can be applied to cheaper leathers much the same way that high quality wood is made into veneer to be applied to common species. The remainder of the split leather, scheduled to become suede, is sent through a brushing machine, which puts on the final finish.

While our pigskin was used primarily for shoes, handbags and book covers, the uses our local leather in the nineteenth century was primarily for shoes, machine belts and harness. One specialized use was deer skin leather for the iron industry. The ironworkers in the forges and blast furnaces, because of their close proximity to intense heat, could not wear breeches of fabric. Yearly, thousands of deerskins were converted into these specialized pants. Another unique use of leather, also by the ironworkers, was for their aprons. For some reason, it was found that beaver skin leather provided the best protection from the high heat and the spatters of molten iron.

The ledger books of Elihu Persons & Co., located in Colebrook River, provide a look into the tanning business one hundred sixty or more years ago. In 1835 they paid about .06 cents a pound for cowhide. One weighing 67 pounds was purchased for \$4.05. Their finished product, such as sole leather, brought about .37 cents a pound when sold to a cobbler.

Many of the sheepskins produced locally were slated for bookbinding, although there had to have been more uses than that, based on the high number of sheep that were raised locally.

John Boyd, writing in his *Annals of Winchester*, states that in 1872 the tannery owned by Alanson Loomis, located about where Cannavo Enterprises is currently located, annually consumed 6,000 tons of bark for tanning and turned out 432,000 skins. He further states that John T. Rockwell, who, with his brother had operated a tannery in Colebrook, removed to Winsted in 1851, where they erected a four-story tannery that twenty years later produced a volume comparable to the Loomis facility.

For anyone interested in seeing first hand the uses leather was put to in past years, a trip to the Torrington Historical Society’s restored machine shop will provide not only answers, but also a most memorable visit.