

WinkWorld May 2003

As I write this month's Prairie Pedagogy, I am in the front passenger seat of a pickup as we drive to Sturgis, South Dakota. My computer is on my lap, and I am bouncing along and writing. The skies are low, steel gray, and it is drizzling; the operative word here is "drizzling." You may recall that I wrote of the drought last summer; it continues. Each day is a struggle as Wink tries to make the decision whether or not to sell off more of the cattle herd. It is a guessing game: will it rain/won't it rain? We need far, far more than the average now to fill the dams for the summer and provide enough feed for the cattle.

This is only Day 4 of my spring break on the ranch, and already I have more stories than are needed for this electronic newsletter.

First, we had to move 13 bulls 6 miles to another pasture. We rode into a cold, howling headwind. The bulls were feisty, fighting, and fuming most of the way, as they jockeyed for who is the biggest and baddest. Once again, it is all about power. As we raced across the prairies into the 30 MPH wind, I yelled to Wink that males really need to stop fighting for power. Power and problems seem similar to me, in that, there will always be enough for all of us.

When the bulls hear the crack of Wink's bullwhip in the air, they know it is time to move. It all seems very Pavlovian. I, on the other hand, have no bull whip and sure couldn't pop it in the air over my shoulder, even if I had one. However, I can see that the bulls are bigger, faster, and stronger than I. Some of you know my horse, Buttercup, from *Critical Pedagogy 2/e*. Buttercup is a strong, courageous animal, who knows what he is supposed to do. I just hold on tight.

Tanning Hides and Making Arrowheads.

A second interesting experience happened when we visited a man who makes arrowheads, knives, bows, arrows and full leather outfits from deer hides that he has tanned himself. As a child, I remember the Lakota Sioux and their sharp arrowheads and the velvet, soft quality of the leather of their ceremonial clothes. I respect the time and talent it takes to make raw hides soft as a baby's skin, and obsidian rocks sharp as a razor. I have often wondered who might carry on these traditions. I now know one person, Mike, who is doing both.

He begins with a hard, dirty deer skin. He scrapes the fur off with a blade, which leaves him with a stiff piece of rawhide. Next, he pushes it into an old ringer washer and washes it in cows' brains to break down the fibers of the leather. After this, he stretches the leather on a 5'-by-5' wooden frame, which he built. Now, the real work begins. With the large end of an old ax handle, which has been rubbed smooth from use, he rubs, pushes, stretches and smooths the leather for hours, until it is soft. Even when he finishes, the soft leather would slowly begin to harden again, if Mike did not put the whole thing into a smoker and smoke it, to maintain its supple nature.

If you ever get to see and touch leather, which has been softened in the traditional way, I hope you will appreciate the work it takes to make it like this.

Mike also demonstrated how to make arrowheads from obsidian. He started with a very common, ordinary-looking rock. On the thigh of his left leg, he placed two strong pieces of

leather for protection. On the table in front of him, he had a whole array of homemade tools from which to choose. It reminded me of a medical doctor choosing from an assortment of scalpels. The tools were various shapes and sizes of deer antlers, wood, and copper, each with a different name. I don't remember any of the words, but I hope to return this summer and see all of this again and learn these words. Mike carefully chose one of his tools, and with a flick of his wrist, the deer antlers chipped a flake off one side of the rock, which he held on the leathers on his leg. He turned the rock over and repeated this action. He was pleased to see the sharp edge of the rock emerge and asked us to check how sharp it was. He held up a thick piece of leather, and I took the rock and touched it to the leather. It immediately sliced through, as if through warm butter.