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Bison Wool Products To Keep You Warm

How many socks can you get from the hair off a bison? Far fewer than you would think since you only get about 4 to 6 oz. of the downlike fibers used in knitted items.

That's one of the reasons the fiber is so precious, says Ron Miskin, who owns The Buffalo Wool Co. with his wife Theresa. Because of its fineness and crimp, it has nearly 12 times more insulating value than sheep's wool and is soft, lightweight, and tough.

"It's less bulky, so there's more dexterity wearing gloves to tie dogsled leads," says Miskin, noting that Iditarod racers and oilfield workers in Alaska are among their customers.

The Miskins' business began 14 years ago as part of the National Bison Association's search for ways to use more parts of the bison. They discovered the demand for the hair when Miskin's father put a listing on eBay for 4 lbs. of bison hair he collected off their Texas ranch's fences. The unwashed hair sold for \$320.

After much research, the Miskins developed a process that starts with shearing the hides of bison when they are processed for meat. A Michigan mill processes it to separate the fine down from the other types of hair. The fiber goes to a Wisconsin mill that spins it into five different base yarns before sending it to sock and hat knitters in Iowa and Texas. The Buffalo Wool Co. harvests the wool from many ranches instead of letting it be burned

off in the tanning process or sent to landfills.

The fibers are then blended with other fibers, such as silk and Merino wool. The business offers several types of socks and hats for different uses. For example, the ProGear boot sock (\$49) blends bison down, silk, and nylon with small percentages of Tencel, polyester, and Spandex to create a soft, warm, and wicking sock ideal for most outdoor winter activities. Lighter socks start at \$27, and the warmest, American Field Kodiak Extreme Gear Boot Socks (\$65), have 90 percent bison down and 10 percent nylon for superior warmth.

"The nylon is for the web to carry the down through the carding process and give it durability," Miskin says.

In addition to warmth, the bison down is a good option for people allergic to sheep wool. The business also sells compression socks, a variety of hats, scarves, neck gaiters, and gloves. Some of the bison's coarser hair is used for fly fishing tying kits and dog beds. "Our mission is to use every part of the buffalo," Miskin says, of the couple's work with the NBA to continue to create products. In addition to clothing, entrepreneurs use hides for furniture and turn tallow into soap, for example.

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Over A Thousand Different Apple Varieties

Looking back, Tom Brown (age 82) realizes he's lucky he started "apple tree hunting" when he did (23 years ago). Many of the people and the varieties grown in the Appalachian region are now gone. Through meeting with people, traipsing through old pastures, and researching century-old textbooks and catalogs, Brown has documented and saved more than 1,200 apple varieties.

The retired chemical engineer from North Carolina grew interested in heritage apples after meeting Maurice Marshall in 1999 at a farmer's market stand, where they discussed apple varieties. That led to Brown's mission to save "lost" varieties.

"What turbocharged me was getting into Wilkes County, where I found 300 varieties associated with that one county," he says, noting half of the county is within an hour of his home. "I found a rare apple almost every time. People took pride in having apples different from their neighbors, and I'd find three or four different ones at each place."

Accompanied by a local minister in one area of Wilkes County, Brown was welcomed by people and allowed access to their property to search for trees.

With permission, Brown clipped scion wood off the trees - limb tips with the most recent and vigorous growth - that he grafted on rootstock. His personal orchard has more than 700 old trees, and he shared trees with nurseries and historic sites such as Horne Creek Farm near Pilot Mountain State Park, N.C.

To figure out the names of varieties, Brown relies on multiple sources. He matches information from people he talks to with researched information.

For example, a couple of men in Macon County, N.C., told him about the Manson Beauty apple. Years later, Brown found one that matched the description, including red streaks in the flesh. By then, the men had died. From the extensive notes Brown takes, he had information about a man familiar with Manson Beauty apples, so Brown mailed him a few apples. The man verified the variety.

Brown has stories of trees so old they only produced one apple. He believes his oldest



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variety is "Ducky," a Pearmain variety with Victorian England roots.

The apple collection includes varieties with colorful, descriptive names: Choking Sweet, Aspirin, Lazarus, August Start, Forward Sweet, etc.

"It's fun, interesting, and challenging and has given me something rewarding to do in my retirement years. I like the challenge of locating apple trees," Brown says.

It's become more challenging over the years since many of the original trees he found have been cut down or died. Evidence of the vastness of his apple tree expeditions can be verified by his two vehicles' odometers getting close to 400,000 miles each.

Brown does presentations and has started writing a book based on his experiences and detailed notes from talking to people.

He's backed off selling trees for a while as he has other work to deal with, but he plans for tree sales to resume in the future.

For now, a big priority is keeping the trees in his orchard alive, as his region has been in an extreme drought. It's a lot of work to move hoses and three sprinklers around his orchard acreage, but Brown will do what it takes to keep the lost apple varieties he found alive.

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Brothers Collect And Restore Snowmobiles, John Deeres, And Harleys

A former dairy farm seems to be an unlikely place for a snowmobile museum. But if you know the Gottschalk family in Kimball, Minn., and their passion for being caretakers of history, it makes perfect sense. For nearly 30 years, they've been filling sheds with treasures ever since Trevor, 12, and Travis, 10, restored their first John Deere tractors. With mechanical skills they inherited from their grandfather, the boys restored nearly 60 John Deere tractors by the time they were in their early 20's.

Their parents Scott and Astrid Gottschalk were supportive and proud of their accomplishments but a little hesitant when

their sons got interested in vintage and antique snowmobiles in 2015. Less than 10 years later, more than 300 snowmobiles filled a farm shed and a couple of semitrailers.

"When the word got out we were collecting, we got calls from several museums," Scott Gottschalk says. Aging collectors wanted their treasures to go to people who love old equipment and want to preserve it. As a national accounts manager consulting with dairy and beef livestock producers, Gottschalk travels all over the country and is often asked by his sons to pick up snowmobiles for their collection.

"Probably the oldest running one is a

1943 WWII military model that was used in Alaska for three soldiers and their weapons," Gottschalk says.

One of three known to exist, the "Motor-Toboggan" was built by Carl Eliason of Sayner, Wis., who built his first machine in 1924 (FARM SHOW Vol. 43, No. 6).

Gottschalk recalls how his son Trevor took the machine to an event with an 8-mile trail ride. He gave a very excited 10-year-old and his dad a ride on the trail, after the dad promised to buy a snowmobile for his son.

Passing on the sport and tradition is the main reason the Gottschalks take snowmobiles to shows.

"We've got a rule. We exhibit all the time, but we never compete because we have museum quality. We hope to get younger kids interested," Gottschalk says.

They have snowmobiles from more than 100 different companies, including 44 of the 64 manufactured in Minnesota. The oldest machines had the engines in the back and went less than 10 mph. Snowmobiles in the 50's and 60's went faster but were more often used for pulling and work. One semitrailer displays a dozen of the 13 big muscle sleds made in 1971 to race on oval tracks.

Visitors are welcome to see the collection by contacting them for an appointment,



Antique museum has snowmobiles from more than 100 different companies.

Gottschalk says. Besides snowmobiles, the farm has sheds with collections of John Deere tractors and toys and all 17 of Harley Davidson's models, including a 1941 military motorcycle that Trevor rides through local towns every Fourth of July.

"We want to preserve history and pass it on, to remember the good things we've got, and to be thankful for our blessings. We're just custodians for a piece of time," Gottschalk concludes.

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Arctic Cat air sled, part of the Gottschalk Collection.