

*"...much fitter for the winters of this country..."*

## Insights into Winter Footwear for Cold Climate Reenacting

by Isaac Walters

As winter approaches I am again reminded of my trials and tribulations in finding adequate winter footwear. For the first four years of my winter reenacting and trekking experience, I tried a different form of footwear every year. Finally, I found a solution that seems to have both the highest utility and is the most correct for my persona.

For much of the colonial period in North America, both military and civilians adopted native-style footwear for winter use. Among my stomping grounds of the Great Lakes, we see moccasins worn in winter by everyday Canadian *habitants*, fur traders, voyageurs, and even as issued military wear. This is true not only here but in other wintry places as well. The question then becomes, "What did these winter moccasins look like and how were they constructed to keep feet warm?" Some quotes from a number of historical documents might help us answer this.

*During the snows we all, French and Natives, made use of this kind of footgear [moccasins], in order to walk upon our Snowshoes. When winter had passed, we resumed our French shoes, and the Natives went barefooted (Father Paul LeJeune 1630s) (1)*

*Shoes [are] made of a simple hide, without a heel and without a hard leather sole. The hide is pressed around the toes of the foot, where it is sewn with cords of gut to a small leather tongue. Then all the flaps are gathered up with straps made of the same hide, which are then passed through spaced holes and tied above the heel after crossing at the front of the ankle. Some of them make their shoes go up to mid-leg, to be less bothered by snow... (Joseph François Lafitau 1720s) (2)*

*Their shoes, although only a simple prepared skin, are very warm, and the snow is so dry that it does not wet. They wrap their feet with pieces of blanket, and the sides of the shoe form a*



The author with warm feet, North of Lake Superior.

*half boot which prevents the snow from getting in, while their feet would freeze with European shoes, as many have unhappily proved. (Pierre Pouchot 1750s) (3)*

*These slippers are generally*

*made of the skin of beaver, elf [elk or moose], calf, sheep, or other pliant leather, half-dressed: each Moggosan is of one intire [sic] piece, joined or sewed up the middle of the vamp, and closed behind like the quarters of a shoe; they have no additional sole or heel-piece,*



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and must be used with three or four frize socks, or folds of thick flannel wrapt around the foot; they are tied on the instep with thongs of the save leather, which are fastened to the joining behind, and run through the upper part of the quarters; they are exceedingly warm, and much fitter for the winters of this country than our European shoe... (John Knox 1750s) (4)

...some rectangular pieces of blanket cloth for foot-wraps, finally six pairs of soft leather shoes, European shoes would be useless here; when frozen stiff, they injure the feet and ruined the snowshoes. (Friedrich Von Graffenried 1810s) (5)

...Indians dress the deer-skins for making moccasins, which are greatly sought after by the settlers in these parts; they are very comfortable in snowy weather, and keep the feet very warm, but you require several wrappings of cloth round the feet before you put them on. (Catherine Parr Traill 1836) (6)

These quotes seem to indicate that winter moccasins were nothing more than slightly oversized moccasins of the regional fashion that were filled with some sort of insulation, in these cases, wool. For most of the historic period wool liners, slippers, or wraps seem to be the most common type of insulation. Other forms of insulation such as leaves, straw, and animal hair (left on



A detail from a Cornelius Krieghoff painting that shows a moccasin used in conjunction with snowshoes.

the moccasins as well as made into socks) are all mentioned in quotes, but I would like to focus on the insulation that is mentioned in the quotes that I have



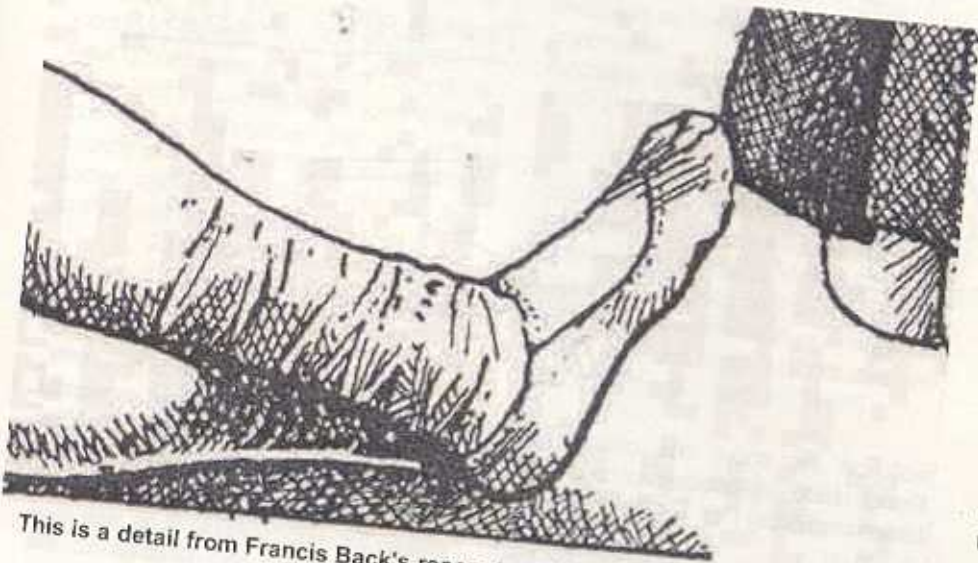
A moccasin from an anonymus painting of Canadian Habitants in the 19th century.

given. Wool liners of various sorts seem to be not only common, but also the easiest to fashion, simplest to wear, and least messy (nothing like using deer hair or dried leaves for insulation and general

mess making). Here in the Great Lakes we mainly see the use of *chaussons* and *nippes*. *Chaussons* are simple wool slippers that were commonly worn in Europe and the colonies. A pattern for these is given by Garsault (7) and can be easily made for our modern uses. I often change the heel construction to one more like a moccasin as I dislike having a seam under my heel when walking. *Nippes* were simple pieces of wool that were used to wrap the feet before they were slid into the moccasin. Researcher, artist, and historian, Francis Back, has written that he believes *nippes* may have been rectangular pieces of wool that were sewn into bags and slipped over the *habitant's* feet (8)

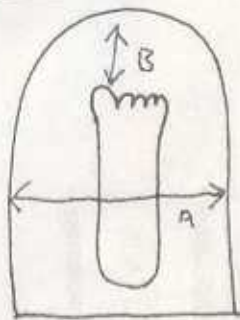
Now we have to ask, "What kind of moccasin do we need to make?" For this, I believe each person needs to look at their own persona and the locality of the persona. For me, here in the Great Lakes, I have found that the most common moccasin in the winter is the large vamp pucker-toe. This type of moccasin is seen in a number of images from throughout the period. Some of these include the well-known "Canadian militiaman on snowshoes going to war over the snow" that is pictured in LaPotherie (9), an ex-voto painting at the Notre Dame-de-Liesse from the early 1700s, Von Germann's paintings from the late 1700s, and M.C. Chapin's and Cornelius Krieghoff's artwork from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This type of moccasin is also described in some fine quotes such as the already mentioned Lafitau quote as well as the following quote from the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Shoes are of moose hide, which is like buffalo. They gather this at

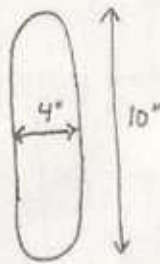


This is a detail from Francis Back's reconstruction of an ex-voto painting in the Notre Dame-de-Liesse.





lower sole



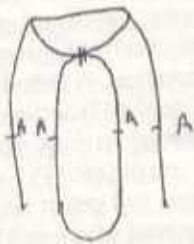
Vamp

A = Measurement around foot at top of instep minus 4" for the vamp

B = Distance from tip of toe to wear you want the vamp on instep



Step 1



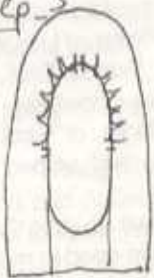
Tack tip of lower to tip of vamp and then edges at A

Step 2



Run a gathering stitch along lower from A point to tip and from tip to the other A point

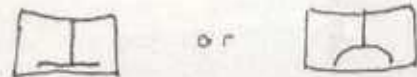
Step 3



Pull gathering stitches to match the lower to the vamp. Sew the vamp to the lower. You may or may not wish to use a welt.

Step 4

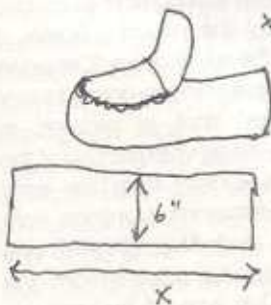
Fit to foot, trim back, and stitch as you would any moccasin.



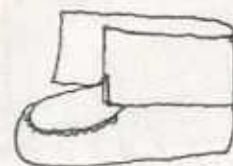
Step 5

Add Uppers

x = long enough to go around top opening of moccasin and wrap at front



The finished moccasin



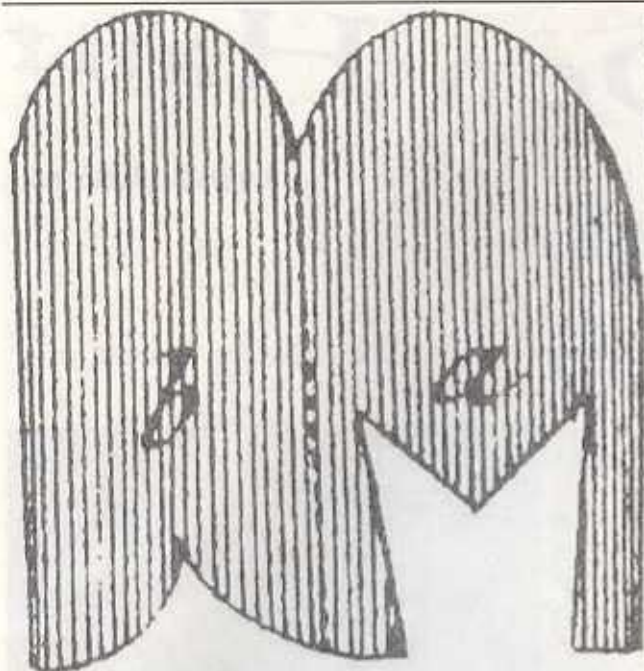
the bottom, then put a square piece [vamp] at the toe, pass a little thong as around a purse and lo, their shoe is made. The French never wear any others in winter, since one cannot go out except with snowshoes under the feet, to

walk on the snow one cannot use French shoes. (An observer in the St. Lawrence 1640s) (10)

Another good reason for this particular style of moccasin is that it is

very functional for winter wear, especially when used with snowshoes as mentioned in the last quote. The flat vamp and lack of a top, center-seam makes for a comfortable fit as well as a tight grip in the tied bindings of the





A pattern of a chausson shown in Garsault.

snowshoe.

**Common winter moccasin mistakes**

1.) **Adding a second or harder sole** – There are a couple problems with a harder sole. The first mistake is that people think that this will help create extra insulation between their feet and the snow. The thick leather actually has very little insulative value. Instead, add one or more extra soles of wool to your liner. This will provide better insulation and will also be a more comfortable. Remember that layers are always good in cold weather. Not only do you get the value of more thickness of wool, but you also get trapped air between the layers. This trapped air becomes very important and effective insulation as well. Another drawback of having hard soles is a lack of traction. A softer leather sole will better form to your foot and will ultimately give you better traction in the snow. Finally, most of our earlier quotes specifically mention soft leather and no additional sole.

2.) **Making the moccasin too big** – A moccasin made too big will be cumbersome for walking, will create more noise when walking, and will prevent you from fitting into snowshoes (although if they are big enough, they become snowshoes themselves!). A well made winter moccasin should not be much larger than your normal moccasin. Remember, your moccasins will most likely stretch to a larger size with

use.

3.) **Wearing moccasins and liners that are too tight** – This can be caused by too small a moccasin, or more commonly by wearing too much inside the moccasin. The tighter the fit, the more problems that you will have with blood-flow and the colder your feet will become. This is also true of modern footwear. Many times I have had friends get cold feet while hunting because their many layers of socks did not allow wiggle room. I like to say that if you can comfortably wiggle your toes inside of your footwear, you are probably safe.

4.) **Greasing your moccasins** – I have found that greasing my moccasins only slightly puts off the inevitable. If it is wet out, your feet WILL get wet. Having greased moccasins just creates a moccasin that will not dry as quick and will tend to be more slippery when walking about. Also, greasing tends to help keep moisture in. This can be a big problem when trying to keep your feet warm. A final note is that there is little documentation on the practice of greasing moccasins. It was done, at least on a couple of occasions, but it was probably not the norm. Our modern thought is that dry feet are warm feet, but perhaps this was not the thoughts of our ancestors as keeping feet dry was nearly impossible. The following quote illustrates what is more likely to have been the mindset of our forefathers.

*I have no doubt that the warmth kept up by the additional covering worn [inside] the moccasins was the means of countering the ill effects of the wet. And I believe that so long as the feet can be kept warm, no harm will ever ensue from damp; it is the cold which does the mischief (George Head 1829) (11)*

1) LeJeune, Father Paul. "Relation of 1634-1635". *Jesuit Relations and Allied Texts Vol. 7*. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1901) pp.16-17

2) Lafitau, Joseph François. *Moeurs des Sauvages Ameriquains... Vol. II* p. 25, Translated by Tim Kent and quoted in his book: *Fort Pontchartrain at Detroit Vol. II*. (MI: Silver Fox Enterprises, 2001) p. 607

3) Pouchot, Pierre. *Memoir upon the Late War in North America, Between the French and the English, 1755-60*. W. (MA: Elliot Woodward 1866) p245

4) Knox, John. *An Historical Journal of the Campaigns in North America For the Years 1757, 1758, 1759, and 1760 Vol. I*. (NY: Greenwood Press 1968) p.111.

5) Von Graffenried, Friedrich. *Sechs Jahre in Canada 1813-1819*, (Hallerische Bern 1891) p. 2

6) Catherine Parr Traill, (1836) quoted in Phillips, Ruth. *Trading Identities: Souvenir in Native N.A. Art 1700-1900* (U. Washington Press, 1998) pp. 251-252

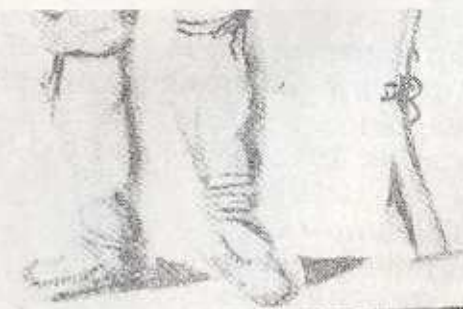
7) F.A. de Garsault

8) Back, Francis. *S'habiller à la canadienne*. Quoted in Gousse, Andre and Suzanne. *Costume in New France From 1740 to 1760*. (Chambly: La Fleur de Lyse, 1997) p.29

9) La Potherie, Claude-Charles Roy, Sieur de Bacqueville. *Histoire de l'Amérique Septentrionale*. (Paris: Nion et Didot, 1722).

10) Marshall, Joyce, transl, and ed. *Word from New France, The Selected Letters of Marie de L'Incarnation*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press. 1967) p. 131

11) Head, George. *Forest Scenes and Incidents in the Wilds of North America, 1829*. (Totonto: Coles Pub. Co. 1970) pp 195-196



Detail of the moccasin on a Canadian habitant from M.C. Chapin (19th century).