



USING NATURAL SINEW

Most of the crafters today relate to sinew as being the waxed polyester continuous filament cord that comes in spools. It is often referred to as imitation sinew. While most that is used in Native American crafts are tan in color to look like the real sinew, some cord used today is also colored.

I first saw this cord in the 1940's when it was invented to wrap communication wire in bundles to install them inside tubes. It was light tan then, usually with 5 strands of continuous fibers that had been pre-waxed before winding together. It was extremely strong and durable for it's purpose. In the late 1940's and early 1950's we began to use it on dance outfit projects. If it was too thick, we learned to separate lengths of fiber to the diameter that worked well and looked good for the project.

The real sinew actually comes from wild animals. **Photo A** shows backstrap sinew that is processed from an elk and from deer. This is actually the muscle tissue that occurs along both sides of the animal's backbone. It is removed, cleaned, and dried when processing the animal. Round leg muscle also is tissue that can be used as sinew. This instruction uses the backstrap sinew, but the leg sinew is handled the same way but relying more on pounding process.

The first step is to pound the dried strap of muscle with a mallet hammer, or a wood mallet. In **Photo B** we are pounding along the length of the strap to loosen the muscle fiber from the dried natural hide glue. Next we use both thumbs and index fingers close together as shown (**Photo C**) and twist the fibers around to separate them. Work the full length of the backstrap this way along the set of fiber bundles you start with.

Sometimes you will be separating just a few fibers, other times you will be splitting the strap. As the fibers loosen, pull it away from the strap (**Photo D and E**). If at first the fiber bundle you pull is too thick for your use, separate the bundle fibers at one end and pull off smaller pieces. (**Photo F and G**)

To use the fiber as thread we need to moisten the fiber before using it to bind up something like an arrowhead, or for threading a needle for sewing. In the old days when we used this sinew we would moisten it by drawing it through our moist lips, but today we highly recommend you moisten it in a small dish of water (**Photo H**).

The thread made this way is very short, but that's how it was before fabric thread was made. **Photo I** shows us threading a glovers needle. In **Photo J** we are wrap stitch sewing the edge of a buckskin bag project. **Photo K** shows us using the sinew thread in a size 10 Sharps needle so we can lazy stitch beads on leather.

The very old pair of two piece brain tanned moccasins shown here were sewn using sinew in the seams by whip stitching, and in sewing the beads on using the lazy stitch style.



Photo C



Photo E



Photo G



Photo I



Moccasins sewn with sinew



Photo B



Photo D



Photo F



Photo H



Photo J



Photo K