



# BISON PICKET ROPE

By Louis “Luke” Lasater 803 H

Am I allowed to use the term “**BISON**?” I just don’t know. May Jed Smith forgive me. Let’s get our terminology straight before we begin. In our

AMM library the term “Bison” appears 25 times. So we know it’s a period correct term. On the other hand, the term “BUFFALO” appears a thumpin’ 2486 times! Notwithstanding that “Buffalo” is a misidentification. The only true Buffalo are the Cape Buffalo of Africa, and the Water Buffalo of Asia.

The shaggy beasts around here are two different species, the Plains Bison, and the Wood Bison. Interestingly, there is a species of Bison in The Caucasus Mountains of Europe! For the purposes of this article I will stick with BISON.

## PICKET ROPE

A Picket Rope is normally a length of cordage about



African  
Cape Buffalo

22 feet in length which is secured to the horse or mule at one end, and secured to a “Picket Pin” on the other. Historically, as with today, upon arrival at a spot to camp the first thing we do is pull the saddles from our animals and stake them out on Pickets so that they may graze for the evening. This practice is described this way:

George Catlin  
LETTER 46

*“I generally halted on the*



“Anybody else? ... This here’s a school for buffalo hunters—and anyone who so much as utters the word ‘bison’ can join Morgenstern in the corner!”



*bank of some little stream,  
at half an hour's sun, where  
feed was good for Charley,  
and where I could get wood  
to kindle my fire, and water  
for my coffee. The first thing  
was to undress "Charley"  
and drive down his picket,  
to which he was fastened,  
to graze over a circle that  
he could inscribe at the end  
of his lasso. In this wise  
he busily fed himself until  
nightfall"*

Journal of E. Willard Smith  
while with the Fur Traders,  
Vasquez and Sublette, in the  
Rocky Mountain Region,  
1839-1840

*"We then continued our  
journey till within an hour of  
sunset, when we encamp;ed  
for the night, prepared our  
supper and picketed the  
horses. This is done by tying  
a rope, eighteen or twenty*

*feet long, to a horse's neck,  
and attaching to it a stake  
driven into the ground,  
which allows them to feed,  
without permitting them to  
wander off."*

ROCKY MOUNTAIN LIFE  
BY RUFUS B. SAGE

*"Strict orders were  
accordingly given for  
securing the animals, and  
the process of "picketing"  
was speedily under way. This  
consisted in driving small  
stakes ("pickets") firmly  
into the ground, at proper  
distances apart, to which the  
animals were severally tied  
by strong cords, —a plan that  
should find nightly practice  
among all travellers of the  
grand prairies, to prevent  
those losses which, despite the  
utmost precaution, will not  
unfrequently occur."*

## WILD LIFE IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

by George Frederick Ruxton

*"When I had placed them  
in security, and taken the  
precaution to fasten them all  
to strong picket-pins, with  
a sufficient length of rope to  
enable them to feed at ease"*

### PICKET PIN

We have just read several  
examples of the Stake called  
the "Picket Pin" being driven  
into the ground. In the field I  
have made a picket pin from  
a tree branch. However, there  
is a design with which the  
mountaineers became familiar:

Washington Irving's The  
Adventures of Captain  
Bonneville

*"Every man is provided  
with a picket with an iron  
head, a mallet, and hobbles,  
or leathern fetters for the  
horses."*



Picketing the Horses - At Evening by Alfred Jacob Miller





Townsend's Across the Rockies to the Columbia

*"To stake or fasten a horse for the night, he is provided with a strong leathern halter, with an iron ring attached to the chin strap. To this ring, a rope of hemp or plaited leather, twenty-two feet in length, is attached, and the opposite end of the line made fast with several clove hitches around an oak or hickory pin, two and a half feet long. The top of this pin or stake is ringed with iron to prevent its being bruised, and it is then driven to the head in the ground."*

In addition to the journal descriptions of Picket Pins using an "Iron Band" at the top of the stake, Alfred Jacob Miller confirms these accounts by including exactly that in his artwork.

What was the design of these ropes, and the material used?

My experience with picketing horses has been in the use of a Hemp Rope. We know from Supply Ledgers and Journals such as Townsend that Hemp Ropes were available and used for this purpose:

*"a rope of hemp or plaited leather, twenty-two feet in length, is attached"*

However, the focus of this article is the Lariat made of Bison rawhide.

There are a few references to these hide cords in the books of the AMM Library. But first, it is important to understand the terminology used. We will see use of the terms: "LARIAT;" and "RIATAS" applied to picket ropes.

Merriam-Webster:

LARIAT: a long light rope (as of hemp or leather) used with a running noose to catch livestock or with or without the noose to tether grazing animals.

A ROPE is made of tightly twisted plant or hair fibers.



A LARIAT is usually four "plaits" of rawhide braided to form a rope.



When considering what material to use for a picket rope, the simplest thing to do is secure 22 feet of Hemp Rope, which is both period correct and available today. It's interesting how that has switched. During the fur trade Hemp Rope was a costly



trade item, while Bison were everywhere to be found, making braided rawhide lariats the economical and practical choice. But today making a Bison lariat is more of a challenge.

Townsend and others make the case that our mountaineers were very familiar with this device.

#### A JOURNEY TO THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS IN 1839

By F. A. Wislizenus, M.D

*"In order that they may easily be caught, they drag a long rope of buffalo leather*

*(trail-rope). At night stakes (pickets) are driven into the earth at some distance from each other, and the animals are fastened to them by ropes."*

#### WILD LIFE IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

by George Frederick Ruxton

*"We then cooked supper, and at dark picketed the animals round the camp, their lariats (or skin-ropes) being attached to pegs driven in the ground."*

*"Jumping off the mule, I thrust the picket at the end of her lariat into the ground"*

Further evidence that these picket ropes were made of rawhide comes with the attention paid to these lariats by local wolves.

#### WILD LIFE IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

by George Frederick Ruxton

*"While encamped on this stream, the wolves infested the camp to that degree, that I could scarcely leave my saddles for a few minutes on the ground without*

*finding the straps of rawhide gnawed to pieces; and one night the hungry brutes ate up all the ropes which were tied on the necks of the animals and trailed along the ground: they were actually devoured to within a yard of the mules' throats."*

*"The night before our departure the wolves ate up all the riatas by which our mules and horses were picketed; and in the morning all the animals had disappeared but one."*

#### LIFE IN THE FAR WEST

by George Frederick Ruxton

*"Wolves are so common on the plains and in the mountains, that the hunter never cares to throw away a charge of ammunition upon them, although the ravenous animals are a constant source of annoyance to him, creeping to the camp-fire at night, and gnawing his saddles and apishamores, eating the skin ropes which secure the horses and mules to their pickets, and even their very hobbles, and not unfrequently killing or entirely disabling the animals themselves."*

None of our mountaineers bother to mention how the picket rope was stowed and transported, but fortunately Alfred Jacob Miller offers one possibility in his artwork as a coil of rope around the animal's neck. So far as I know he never stated







Pierre - by Alfred Jacob Miller

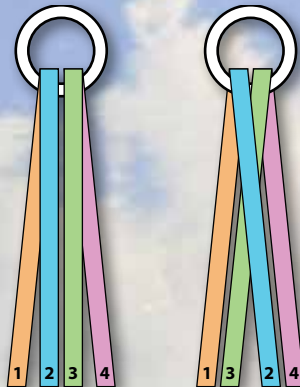
that this coil is a picket rope, so I have to admit some speculation here. The fact that every animal requires a picket rope, combined with the frequency and appearance of the long coil on nearly every animal's neck offers some support for this idea. Here are a few examples:



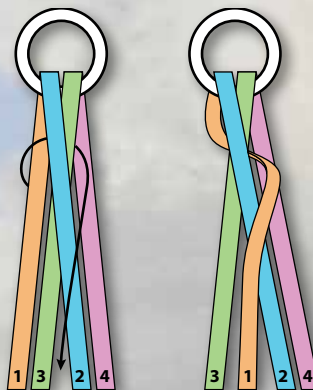




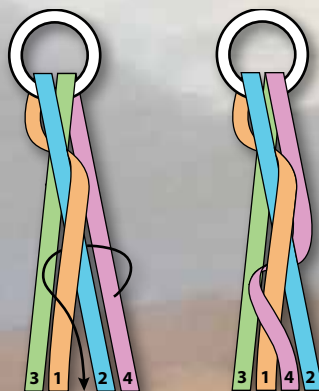
It may be useful at this point to offer some encouragement to those of you willing to forge ahead with your Bison Rope project by supplying illustrations for a four plait round braid.



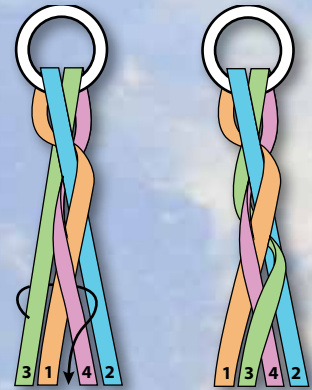
Cross 2 over 3



Take 1 behind 3 and 2, then turn 1 over as you bring it over 2



Take 4 behind 2 and 1, then turn 4 over as you bring it over 1



Take 3 behind 1 and 4, then turn 3 over as you bring it over 4

## THE PROJECT

Having done the research, it was time to put it to practical use, and build a Bison Picket Rope.

After securing a raw Bison hide, I had to soak it to get it nice and soggy, then string it up on the rack. After a few days drying I was able to use a "Wahinke" to scrape the hair off. Only the rear two thirds of the hide was scraped, as that would be all the material I would need. The hairy parts would be another project





Next I cut the hide down, soaked it, and cut out the rawhide section.



Now comes a task that will take a while and require patience. Cut the rawhide into a strip about 0.75 inches wide, spiraling down to the center.



My target was a 22 foot Lariat, so I laid out this lengthy strap to get four lengths of 30 feet each. These were coiled up on four sticks, ready for the braiding process.



I tied the straps to a stake in the ground, and started braiding. This was a protracted labor, which about crippled me.

After many hours in the blazing sun, this was the result. A 27' period correct Bison Picket Rope. They had 'em.

