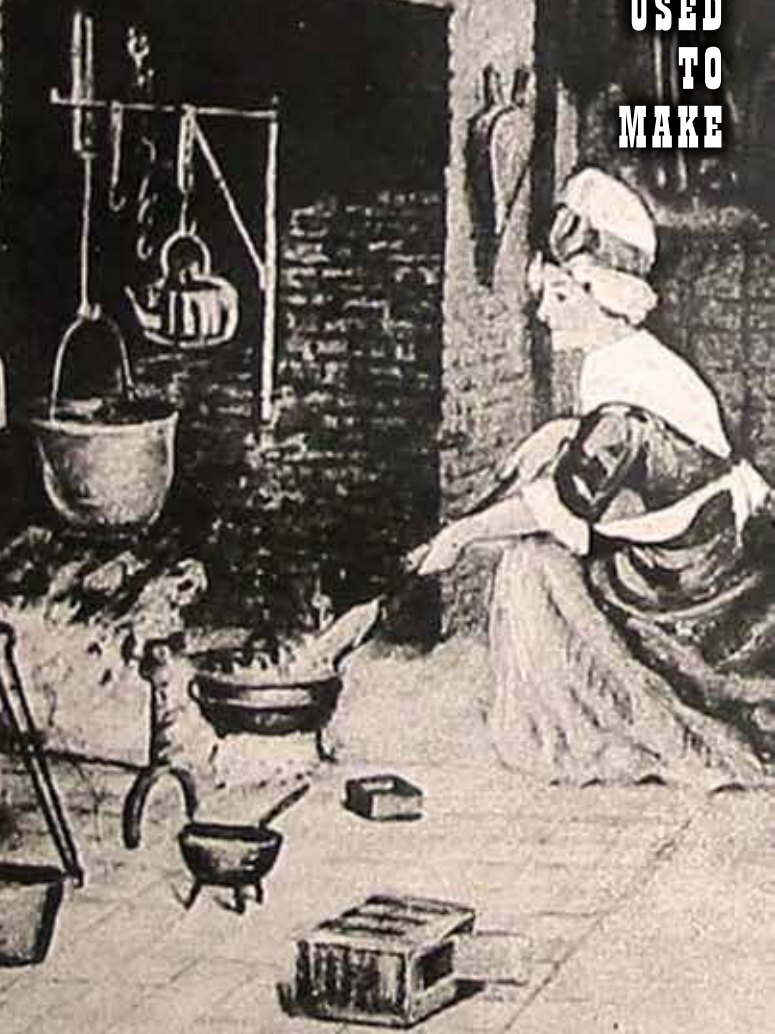


MAKING FIRE

JUST
LIKE
MOM
USED
TO
MAKE



By
Louis "Luke" Lasater H803

In 1968 The American Mountain Men was conceived by its founder Walt Hayward as an outdoor survival organization. He quickly realized that when it comes to wilderness survival there were none better than The Mountain Men. As members of this organization we are required to emulate the ways and gear of the original fur trade era mountaineers as closely as possible. The more we can learn about them the more likely we are to succeed in our goal to become the kind of survivalists that Mr. Hayward envisioned.

For example, if we are to become as proficient in the art of fire ignition as they were, we must first discover by historical research HOW they made fire, and apply what we learn in the field, so that we may know as they knew.

In the mid 1970's I was the consummate back packer. Whenever I could get into the canyons of Utah's majestic Wasatch Front I was gone. Nothing in the world below was as comforting as the freedom and peace I could find in the mountains. Here I was truly at home. One day as I sat along side a trail eating a can of spaghetti with meatballs there came up the trail two men wearing leather pants and looking like frontiersmen. As a kid I had been a fan of Daniel Boone so I kind of understood. As we became acquainted I learned their names were Rod Larkin AMM # 697 and Dirk Johnson. I asked them if they were up there for a day hike. "No," replied Rod, "we will spend a couple nights." "Where are your sleeping bags?" "We don't need any. We will just make a shelter." Now that really caught my attention, as I knew something about how harsh that environment can be around 4am. "That's pretty cool," I said, "But what will you eat?" Dirk had a Bridger Hawken over his shoulder which he raised a little and said, "We'll get something." This was getting better by the minute. These guys were doing what I always wanted to do, but just never crossed paths with the right people - until today. Rod explained to me that if I was interested in this stuff there was a store down in Kaysville called, Bear Canyon Sporting Goods. His brother Scott operated the store and he could fix me up with everything I needed.

I will never forget the first time I entered that store in Kaysville. It was like coming home. Fully stocked with fur trade era goods and material to build your own gear. Piles of buffalo hides, deer skins, tomahawks, a wall filled with muzzleloading weapons. It was beautiful. The first thing I bought was a Russell Green River knife kit.



I soon became friends with Scott Larkin AMM #660, who became the best kind of mentor a young man could have. One day he told me you could start a fire with just ONE SPARK! "No, you can't. It's not possible ... is it?" Scott took me to the front door of the store and opened a flint and steel kit. I had never seen one before. He selected a square of black cloth which he called, "Char Cloth," folded the char cloth, and pinched it under his thumb on top of a sharp piece of flint. It took only a couple hits from a hand forged piece of metal he called a "Steel" when a single spark insinuated itself into the fibers of that char cloth and began to grow.

The char cloth was placed into a nest of juniper bark and quickly blown into a flame! It was an amazing display of skill and know-how. I quickly learned how to make fire just as he had demonstrated and spent a good deal of time up in Bair Canyon testing all types of kindling.

MAKING CHAR



FLINT AND STEEL

As with most of the buck skinning world I went to the drug store and bought a tin can of cough drops, dumped the contents out, stuffed the can with squares of an old cotton shirt, and placed the can in a camp fire. This cooked until smoke stopped pouring from the seams of the lid. I had made CHAR CLOTH and it worked like a charm. The blackened can was now

my "strike-a-light" kit where I kept the char, flint, and steel.

In describing this method of making char cloth and of fire ignition I am sure many of you, or MOST of you, learned the same. It was pretty standard back in the latter half of the 20th century, and among most buckskinners is still the way things are done.

THE HISTORICAL METHOD

The subject of this article is how the Mountain Men made fire in the Rocky Mountain West during the fur trade using flint and steel. That seems simple enough, after all, I learned this as a teenager. However, as with most aspects of this world of historical interpretation and applied anthropology, with time and research our knowledge expands. We study museum collections, scholarly literature, period journals, period newspapers, discoveries gained in the field, then apply what we learn. Technology, methods and tools once accepted as valid become obsolete with each new discovery. When we accept history as we find it, we begin to improve as survivalists. But it requires intellectual honesty.

To improve as survivalists, and to know as the Mountain Men knew, it is time we reconsider our methods and equipment for fire making. First, it will help to gain a little 19th century understanding.

TERMINOLOGY

In our time, the 21st century, many of the words common to people of the early 19th century have been lost, or their meanings entirely changed. We have even invented terminology that would perplex James Bridger. "The Diamond Fly Tent" for example. By an appeal to Webster's 1828 Dictionary we can gain insight into what we read in the journals of the time.

CHAR, noun A fish.



The term "Char" does not appear in any of the period journals or documents which I have searched. From what I can gather they referred to the material which received the spark simply as "**TINDER**."

*"... with his supply of dried meat, and his tobacco-pouch replenished to last him through his journey to the "beautiful hunting grounds of the shades of his fathers" -- with his flint and steel, and his **TINDER**, to light his pipes by the way."*¹

TINDER

TIND'ER, noun Something very flammable used for kindling fire from a spark; as scorched linen.

PUNK or SPUNK

SPUNK, noun [probably from punk.]

1. Touchwood; wood that readily takes fire.

TOUCHWOOD

TOUCH-WOOD, noun tuch'-wood. [touch and wood.] Decayed wood, used like a match for taking fire from a spark.

KINDLING

KIN'DLING, participle present tense Setting on fire; causing to burn with flame; exciting into action.

MATCH

MATCH, noun, Some very combustible substance used for catching fire from a spark, as hemp, flax, cotton, tow dipped in Sulphur, or a species of dry wood, called vulgarly touch-wood.

Interestingly, the words **STEEL** and **STRIKER** both appear in the dictionary, but neither word is associated with making fire.

In all the journals for which I have searchable text I can find only **ONE** instance of the use of the term "**STRIKER**" in relation to fire.

"Soon after our departure from the fort there came on a cold rain-storm, which lasted several hours; the storm raged fiercely, and we had to make fast to a snag in the middle of the river to save ourselves

from driving ashore. I had my Indian FIRE-STRIKER, and, amid all the wind and rain, I repeatedly lit my pipe. My young passenger was astonished at the performance. "If you can strike a fire," he exclaimed, "in such a storm as this, I do not fear perishing." ²

In the journals the term "STEEL" is also used in relation to making fire and with much greater frequency than "Striker." As we do today, they used the same terminology:

"FLINT AND STEEL" ^{3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14}

"STEEL" ^{8, 11}

"FIRE STEEL" ¹⁰

WHERE DID THEY LEARN?

To understand the Mountain Men, we have to learn something about their early training. Where and how did they learn to make fire? They came from the cities and farms of New York, Virginia, Tennessee and other states in the east. They came from Europe, the provinces of Canada, and from the Spanish border lands. Growing up these boys would witness their mothers starting fire in the fire place, or in the stove, or lighting candles. In those days every home had what was called a "Tinder Box" kept on the fire place mantle or near the stove. A physical description of the Tinder Box Follows:

"The old-fashioned cottage TINDER-BOX was generally made of wood, about eight inches long, four inches wide, and two inches deep; divided in the middle; one compartment containing the steel, the flint, and matches; the other the tinder, and damper. Such, at least, was the form with which housekeepers were familiar eighty years ago." ¹⁵

"In the morning early, before dawn, the



first sounds heard in a small house were the click, click, click of the kitchen-maid striking FLINT AND STEEL OVER THE TINDER IN THE BOX. When the tinder was ignited, the maid blew upon it till it glowed sufficiently to enable her to kindle a match made of a bit of stick dipped in brimstone [sulphur]." ¹⁶



Sulphur Matches (Spunks)

"Down to the time of our grandfathers, and in some country homes of our fathers, lights were started with these crude elements,--FLINT, STEEL, TINDER,--and transferred by the sulphur splint" ¹⁷

"In use the FLINT WAS STRUCK IN A VIGOROUS DOWNWARD MOTION AGAINST THE STEEL, SENDING

*A SHOWER OF SPARKS INTO THE TINDER which was arranged in the bottom of the box. The sparks (actually pieces of burning steel broken off by the harder flint) created very small embers as they fell onto the charcloth, the glow of which, with some gentle blowing, would be enough to ignite a sulfur tipped wooden splint. The splint could then be carried to a candle, often set in a holder on the top of the box, and finally the cloth would be extinguished with a damper to preserve it for further use."*¹⁸

"Holding the circlet of steel vertically in your left hand you strike diagonally downward upon its outer edge with the flint so that A SPARK OF PERCUSSION FLIES DOWNWARD INTO THE TINDER, which is a scorched linen rag lying in the box beneath; the latter holds the spark as a smouldering ember, until you touch the splunk or sulphur-tipped splint upon it, whereupon with a little blowing the sulphur takes fire and you have a lighted match with which you light the candle.

After you make the spark, as explained,

MOM'S TINDER BOX



Damper
or Inner Lid

Scorched
Linen
Tinder

Sulphur
Matches

Flint and Steel



*you must retain it or out it goes. You must throw it into tinder and allow it to smoulder there. TINDER among our ancestors in colonial times, was generally an old piece of COTTON OR LINEN RAG, a worn out handkerchief for instance, thrown on the kitchen fire till it blazed, stamped out on the hearth and then placed in the box or, on the other hand, fired and smothered in the box with the inner lid."*¹⁹

FIRE OUT WEST

In contrast with what I was doing as a boy, striking steel to flint, the historical record just cited describes striking flint to steel to shower sparks down onto the tinder. If this was the practice of our colonial ancestors, then certainly that was the example set for Jim Bridger and the others. The historians make it clear that the tinder in the tinder boxes was scorched linen or cotton - what we are pleased to call "charcloth" today.

*"Among the colonists SCORCHED LINEN was a favorite TINDER to catch the spark of fire; and till this century all the old cambric handkerchiefs, linen underwear, and worn sheets of a household were carefully saved for this purpose"*²⁰

But in the Rocky Mountains those materials were scarce. Any supply of cotton or linen that may have been carried into the great plains on the way west could not be relied upon to last for long, and would be more useful for patching bullets or for trade. There had to be a good substitute where they were going.

THE ANSWER

PUNK WOOD or SPUNK or TOUCH WOOD.

"...the next thing, is, to make a fire; and here ingenuity is often put to the rack - when

*the leaves and grass are dry, no difficulty occurs - SPUNK, and flint, and steel ought to be found in every woodman(s) pouch - the spunk, when fired by a spark from the steel will communicate a blaze to many dry objects, by a little blowing - small dry sticks, are first added - then larger limbs, until logs, are burnt with ease."*²¹

*"Fire making is a simple process with the mountaineers. Their bullet pouches always contain flint and steel, and sundry pieces of PUNK (a pithy substance found in dead pine trees) or tinder; and pulling a handful of dry grass, which they screw into a nest, they place the lighted punk in this and closing the grass over it, wave it in the air, when it soon ignites, and readily kindles the dry sticks forming the foundation of a fire."*²²



Punk wood is the soft, spongy material found in a rotting log. I have found cottonwood punk to be the best for this purpose, but have also successfully used punk from pine trees. Fortunately, this material can be found almost everywhere in the Rocky Mountain west, and is a superior tinder to scorched linen.



Punk wood (Spunk) taken from a cottonwood log found along the Weber River in Northern Utah. The Weber River was named for the trapper John H. Weber who was one of the original Ashley-Henry men.



Preparing punk wood for use is a simple task. It consists of roasting a chunk over a fire until it is black. You can skewer it with a sharp stick and cook it like a marshmallow. Tongs can be useful for holding the punk wood over the fire until it is sufficiently blackened. Trade ledgers affirm that Tongs did come out west if you decide to use them.

*Astorian Records: 1 pair smith's tongs - - - - 50
Fort Union: Tongs \$1 a pr., 6 pr. tongs*

One item which the modern buckskinner uses to make "char cloth" is a tin can, usually with a hole in the lid. As of this writing I can find NO DOCUMENTATION for using a metal can to cook cloth or punk. That was NOT a practice back in the states, and it was NOT a practice in the mountains. Back home cloth was scorched in the fire using tongs, then smothered in the Tinder Box. In the mountains punk wood was prepared in the same way, however the Tinder Box was a small container made of Brass, Copper, Steel, or Horn.



Mountain Man's Tinder Box
Sometimes called a "Snuff Box"



These Tinder Boxes were not meant to be placed into a fire for charring tinder. Their design was to smother and store the tinder.





Tinder Box containing Burnt Cottonwood Punk

If it is true that, "... *spunk, and flint, and steel ought to be found in every woodman(s) pouch ...*"²¹ Then we American Mountain Men today should follow the lead of the original mountaineers and learn to use burnt punk wood in place of charred cloth. Doing so will improve our capabilities as primitive outdoor survivalists by ending our need for an endless supply of cotton or linen, and it will make the char baking tin obsolete.



Flint to Steel The Mountaineer way

Now you may make fire *just like Mom used to make!* With the tinder box open, strike flint to steel showering the tinder with sparks. When a spark

catches, move the glowing ember to the kindling nest, and close the lid on your tinder box.

As you travel in the mountains, and along the rivers of the fur trade, keep an eye open for rotting logs from which you may gather raw punk wood which will replace charred punk used to make the camp fire that day. Keep the raw punk in your saddle bags or possibles bag. Making this transition from Char Cloth to Charred Punk is immensely rewarding, fun, and historically valid.

SOURCES

- 1 Letters And Notes On The Manners, Customs, And Conditions Of North American Indians
Letter 32 By George Catlin
- 2 From The Life And Adventures Of James P. Beckwourth:
- 3 The River of the West
- 4 Townsend's Across the Rockies to the Columbia
- 5, 6, 7 Wild Life In The Rocky Mountains
By George Frederick Ruxton
- 8 Forty years a fur trader on the upper Missouri: the personal narrative of Charles Larpenteur, 1833-1872
- 9, 10 Washington Irving's Astoria
- 11 Letters And Notes On The Manners, Customs, And Conditions Of North American Indians
Letter 55 By George Catlin
- 12 Letters And Notes On The Manners, Customs, And Conditions Of North American Indians
Letter 30 By George Catlin
- 13 Letters And Notes On The Manners, Customs, And Conditions Of North American Indians
Letter 16 By George Catlin
- 14 Letters And Notes On The Manners, Customs, And Conditions Of North American Indians
Letter 12 By George Catlin
- 15 John Holland, On Tinder Boxes, 1866, England
- 16 Sabine Baring-Gould, Strange Survivals, 1892, Devon, England
- 17 Beverley's History and Present State of Virginia, published originally in London in 1705
- 18 Seymour Lindsay, J. (1927). Iron And Brass Implements Of The English House
- 19 Henry Chapman Mercer 1912
- 20 Household Words, c1850
- 21 Henry Leavitt Ellsworth's Washington Irving on the Prairie OR a Narrative of a Tour of the Southwest in the Year 1832, p. 27 & 28
- 22 Life In The Far West, By George Ruxton, Page 53

